INTERSUBJECTIVITY AND <u>PRAXIS</u>:

HERMENEUTICS AS THE TASK OF THE CONGREGATION

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W. Alan Smith

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W. Alan Smith

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Faculty Committee

Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore
Chairman

William A. Beardslee

Mary S. Pope

Date May 7, 1991

Allen J. Moore

ABSTRACT

Intersubjectivity and <u>Praxis</u>:

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The dissertation begins with a discussion of several
current approaches to the use of the Bible in Christian
religious education. After presenting some of the problems
with several objective and subjective approaches to the Bible,
the author proposes an understanding of the congregation as
a hermeneutical community.

Part I is an examination of the philosophical
hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer. The chapter is organized
around Gadamer's general hermeneutical theory, some
implications of his approach for biblical hermeneutics, and
some implications of his work for the field of Christian
religious education. Gadamer's hermeneutic is intersubjective,
dialectical, and practical.

In Part II, Thomas Groome's shared Christian praxis
approach to Christian religious education is described. This
section focuses on the ways Groome understands and makes use
of the philosophical issue of praxis. The philosophical
background that undergirds Groome's use of praxis is traced.
Particular attention is given to the way Groome makes use of
the transformative pedagogy of Paulo Freire. His five-step
approach is presented and evaluated. The chapter concludes
with a discussion of the contributions and limitations of

Groome's approach.

Part III is a proposal for Christian religious education as a tornado of faith. The model is grounded in the congregation as a hermeneutical community that engages its members in a dialectic between the Bible and the situation of the larger community in which it is set.

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PREFACE

The following work has arisen from a long standing discomfort with two elements in contemporary forms of Christian religious education. The first point of discomfort is the understanding of the nature of the community of faith, especially in its congregational form. To state the matter simply, I have come to the realization that the congregation is often regarded as a static entity, almost an enclave, in which persons isolate themselves from the outside world and focus on their own institutional needs and their personal, vertical relationships with God. The model I present in the dissertation is one attempt to re-define the congregation as a community of faith that is in a dialectical relationship with the larger community within which it is set.

The second point of discomfort is the way the church has used the Bible. In the Introduction, I discuss what I regard as the predominant attitudes toward the Bible in the contemporary church. The model of Christian religious education I present in Part III is based in a dialectical understanding of the relationship between the Bible and the congregation as a community of faith.

I developed the metaphor of the swirling winds of faith from several sources. The first is the common imagery of spirals in praxis methodologies of philosophy and education. I encountered this paradigm through course work with Mary Poplin in the Claremont Graduate School, Department of

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Education as well as some of her published work. Mary Elizabeth Moore's presentation to the plenary session of the Religious Education Association at Toronto in November, 1987 employed the metaphor of the spiral as a way of describing the action of religious education. Since then, I have encountered the spiral model in the work of Marion Pardy and Iris Ford.

The specific application of the spiral to the metaphor of the swirling winds came during my work with a project on the ordained ministry for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The metaphor arose out of conversations with Dr. Susanne Johnson, of Perkins School of Theology, Dr. Stuart McLean, of the Graduate Seminary of Phillips University, Dr. Terry Ewing, Associate Regional Minister for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Kentucky, and Rev. Carol Lavery, Associate Regional Minister for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Georgia. The group was struggling to develop ways to understand youth ministry and the relationship between the youth culture (or sub-culture) and the church, which assumes the adult culture. The kind of conflict that characterizes this cultural clash is potentially destructive. However, the same forces that might result in disaster could also become empowering if directed positively. The metaphor of a tornado emerged from that series of conversations, and this metaphor led to the claim that a tornado is one of the forms of swirling winds possible in Christian religious education. I owe these colleagues credit for helping me

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develop the image to its present state.

Several of the sources I have employed in the research for the dissertation were written in a time when inclusive language was not in vogue. I will not, therefore, attempt to encumber the text with an endless stream of insertions reading [sic.] Instead, I will quote my sources directly and allow their non-inclusive language to stand on its own merit. In my own work, I will attempt to avoid masculine pronouns as the generic pronoun. One consistent effort at inclusive language will be the use of "his or her," and "she or he."

INTRODUCTION

The church has consistently considered the Bible one of the primary influences in its understanding of the history, nature, and function of the church in the world. The early church was informed by Scripture. At the same time, the early church <u>formed</u> Scripture as it acted upon the ongoing revelation of God in the midst of the sociopolitical realities of its day.[*]

The contemporary church has used the Bible in one of several ways. One common approach has been to read the Bible objectively: to separate it from questions of truth and meaning, step back from the subjective experience with the text, and read it critically, scientifically, and objectively.

Historical-critical approaches to the Bible assume that the interpreter may discover what the Bible originally said and also what it probably meant to those early hearers; they do this by the proper application of critical method. In this approach, the text of the Bible is examined with the same dispassionate, methodological principles as any other piece of literature. In its most extreme forms, objectivism divorces the text from any effect on the present experience of the interpreter. The text of the Bible becomes little more than data that remains hidden away in the deep, dark past. The

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[*]Reginald H. Fuller makes this claim in <u>The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives</u> (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980).

attempt to objectify the text so the scholar may study it critically often focuses exclusively on what the Bible meant when it was written, spoken, or originally heard. As the present interpreter addresses the text of the Bible, the text is silent and passive. The interpreter acts as the only subject, and the text becomes the object being studied. The interpreter dominates the act of interpretation. She or he controls the outcome of interpretation through the manipulation of a methodology applied to exegete the text. The Bible has virtually no voice in the present; it is reduced to functioning as an object upon which the operation of the expert is performed.

Another form of the objectivist approach to the Bible is to identify the content of the Bible as containing the infallible words of God. In this approach, the words contained in the Bible present absolute values and the authoritarian Word of God. In essence, the claim of this approach, which is frequently voiced by conservative and fundamentalist Christians, is that the subject in the act of interpretation is the Word of God, which is identified with the actual words in the text. The interpreter becomes the object upon whom the action is performed. The Word of God is understood as the active agent in the relationship, with the reader or interpreter being seen as a passive recipient of the authoritative voice of God. This approach is still objectivist in nature, because one partner in the interpretive act <u>acts</u>,

while the other is acted upon.

The purpose of the dissertation is to address the role of the Bible in the religious education of the congregation. The research focuses on two alternative understandings of the Bible and on the educational dimension of the congregation. Part I examines the intersubjective hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer as one corrective to the objectivism he claims has resulted from the Enlightenment's over-emphasis on human reason. According to Gadamer, the text operates as a fellow subject in the hermeneutical event, not as an object to be studied and dispassionately analyzed. Gadamer proposes a dialectical model of textual interpretation in which both the text and the interpreter become caught up in the emergence of meaning. By focusing on the message contained in the text and not on the intentions of the authors of the text or on the authority of the text, Gadamer allows the subject matter in the text to challenge the reader's prejudice toward the world.

Gadamer's approach avoids the objectivist fallacy of condemning texts to an innaccessible past to which one can gain access only by applying the proper method. In his hermeneutics, texts actively engage their interpreters in an interactive, to-and-fro play of dialogue.

Gadamer's approach is not without its problems. One frequent criticism of his work is that his claim that there is no absolute truth for a text, but only the truth and meaning that emerges in the event of interpretation here-and-

now, can easily lead to relativism. Another constant claim has been that Gadamer's hermeneutic is appropriate for interpreting texts, but is so focused on the intellectual and cognitive issue of interpretation that it can lead to sociopolitical quietism. He believes the questioning that characterizes hermeneutics should lead to the emergence of something new. However, the new thing that results is, more often than not, a new way of thinking, not new ways of acting.

Part II presents a second understanding of the Bible and its role in Christian religious education. The shared Christian praxis approach of Thomas Groome draws upon his study of the philosophical tradition that leads from Aristotle to Hegel and Marx to Paulo Freire. Groome claims Christian religious education should be organized around a dialectical approach which begins with the shared present experience of persons within the community of faith. His approach moves to critical examination of the implications of that present action, and then dialogue with the historic, shared Story of the community of faith. Finally, this dialectically interpreted Story is brought into dialogue with the Vision of the Reign of God and the sharing of personal visions of how one might live one's life as a result of the praxis of Christian religious education.

Groome's adaptation of Freire's transformative pedagogy is, like Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, a dialectical approach to the use of the Bible. Groome insists that the

crucial role of the shared Christian Story in his approach links the interpreter to the historic rootage of the church in the Bible, church history, doctrine, liturgy, and the magisterium, or teaching office of the church. Because he understands the Christian faith to be in a dialectical relationship with the past, the interpreter is not free to play "fast and loose" with the biblical text. Because he understands the present experience of the person within the community of faith to be living toward the future Reign of God, his approach includes a sense of being called toward new action.

The thesis of the dissertation is that a method which holds an intersubjective approach to Scripture in dialectical tension with a _praxis_ approach to education can answer many of the problems that emerge when these approaches are used separately. The development of this thesis becomes the grounding for Part III.

Part III proposes a model of the congregation as a hermeneutical community. The three chapters in Part III address the nature of the congregation through three images. Chapter 7 describes the nature of the congregation as a community of faith. Chapter 8 builds upon that image and suggests that the congregation is a hermeneutical community. The final chapter offers another image: the hermeneutical community as swirling winds of faith.

The final is based on the common use of a spiral to

represent the interplay of theory and practice in <u>praxis</u> approaches to education and philosophy. The spiral is described as swirling winds in the final chapter for two reasons. First, Gadamer claims that meaning emerges from the complex interaction of dialogue between two subjects. He understands the meaning of a text to be intersubjective, not the product of excellent method or authoritarian imposition. The meaning of a biblical text emerges as the text is applied to the life experience of the interpreter. The illustration of this insight looks like a tornado. Second, the metaphor of swirling winds points to the powerful, dynamic, interactive nature of Christian religious education in a congregation that understands itself as a hermeneutical community.

The dissertation presents an alternative to objectivist approaches to the Bible. The author claims that a congregation as a hermeneutical community can engage in a hermeneutic of intersubjective interpretation of the Bible. The congregation may also engage in a hermeneutical presence in the geographical neighborhood by interacting with its neighbors as partners in dialogue concerning their situations. Dialogue with the Bible will lead to efforts toward greater humanization of the larger community. And actions to transform the sociopolitical realities of the congregation and the larger community will lead to more dialogue with the Bible. The metaphor of swirling winds of faith describes the dynamic interaction of these twin moments of the hermeneutical work

of the congregation.

PART I

HANS-GEORG GADAMER'S

PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

PART I

HANS-GEORG GADAMER'S

PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

Hans-Georg Gadamer's masterwork, <u>Truth and Method</u>[1] has been called "one of the few most important books of this century."[2] The debate fostered by the book has placed hermeneutics at the forefront of philosophical and theological discussion. David E. Klemm has stated: "Hans-Georg Gadamer, more than anyone else, is responsible for intensifying and enlivening hermeneutical discussion since 1960."[3]

Gadamer's understanding of hermeneutics draws heavily upon the thought of his teacher, Martin Heidegger. This is particularly evident when one compares the two on the issue of ontology. David E. Linge has suggested:

> The task of philosophical hermeneutics, therefore, is ontological rather than methodological. It seeks to throw light on the fundamental conditions that underlie the phenomenon of understanding in all its modes, scientific and nonscientific alike, and that constitute understanding as an event over which the interpreting subject does not

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[1]Hans-Georg Gadamer, <u>Truth and Method</u>, eds. Garret Barden and John Cumming (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1982).

[2]Charles E. Scott, "Gadamer's 'Truth and Method,'" <u>Anglican Theological Review</u> 59 (January 1977), 63; this opinion is shared by Dieter Misgeld, "On Gadamer's Hermeneutics" in <u>Hermeneutics and Praxis</u>, ed. Robert Hollinger (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 143.

[3]David E. Klemm, "Introduction to Gadamer's 'The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem,'" in <u>Hermeneutical Inquiry: Volume I: The Interpretation of Texts</u>, ed. David E. Klemm (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 173.

ultimately preside.[4]

Other major influences on his thought include the
phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Wilhelm Dilthey's
reflections on the historical horizon.[5] A careful
investigation of his writing will reveal Gadamer's knowledge
of Hegel's understanding of dialectic, Aristotle's Ethics,
Friedrich Schleiermacher's "psychologizing" hermeneutics, and
the Enlightenment-influenced Romantic hermeneutic of
objective, scientific investigation as well.

The title of a collection of Gadamer's essays is
indicative of the nature of his thought, which has been
described as "philosophical hermeneutics."[6] His work deals
with what Richard Palmer has called

> the fully philosophical questions of the relationship of
> language to being, understanding, history, existence, and
> reality. Hermeneutics is put in the center of the
> philosophical problems of today; it cannot escape the
> epistemological or the ontological questions when
> understanding itself is defined as an epistemological and
> ontological matter.[7]

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[4]David E. Linge, editor's introduction to Philosophical
Hermeneutics, by Hans-Georg Gadamer, trans. and ed. David E.
Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), xi.

[5]Gadamer, Truth and Method, xv.

[6]Gadamer, Philosophical Hermeneutics. Gadamer has used
this designation as well. He refers to "the hermeneutics that
I characterize as philosophic" in "Hermeneutics as Practical
Philosophy" in Reason in the Age of Science, trans. Frederick
G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 111.

[7]Richard E. Palmer, Hermeneutics (Evanston: Northwestern
University Press, 1969), 42-43. Paul Ricoeur traces the
history of modern hermeneutics through the movement from
regional hermeneutics toward general hermeneutics and then

One of Gadamer's most important contributions to biblical interpretation is his challenge to the claim that the historical-critical methodology is the <u>only</u> legitimate methodology for interpreting the Bible. As the later discussion will indicate, Gadamer opposes the assumption that interpretation is a matter of proper method; interpretation is, in his opinion, a way to address the question of "being" itself. Although he has been criticized for being either non-methodical or anti-methodical, one may not claim that Gadamer is absolutely opposed to the use of methodology in <u>any</u> situation. He does not deny the right of science to use the method it has developed; he simply denies the right of this one method to limit both what can be known and how it may be known.[8]

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from general hermeneutics in the human sciences toward ontology in the thought of Heidegger. Gadamer's work, he claims, represents "the beginnings of the movement of return from ontology towards epistemological problems." See Ricoeur, "The Task of Hermeneutics," in <u>Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences</u>, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 60.

[8]Both Emilio Betti and E.D. Hirsch have criticized Gadamer for a lack of an identifiable method for his hermeneutics. See Palmer, 46-67 for a discussion of the longstanding debate between these individuals. Another frequent critic of Gadamer's approach to method has been Jürgen Habermas. See especially the debate between the two in Habermas, <u>Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik</u> (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971); and <u>Knowledge and Human Interests,</u> trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (London: Heinemann, 1972). Several others have commented that Gadamer's argument against the dominance of the scientific method does not amount to a rejection of method per se. See, for example, Joel C. Weinsheimer, <u>Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method</u> (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 6.

Gadamer presents a constructive reflection on the nature of hermeneutics that draws a creative connection between hermeneutics and praxis.[9] Drawing from a thorough study of Aristotle, and in particular from his Ethics, Gadamer consistently argues that hermeneutics is a "practical philosophy."[10] He suggests that such fields as art, law, and theology are not properly suited to a scientific method because they "know" reality in a different way than science. Aristotle makes a distinction between three ways of knowing: technē, epistemē, and phronēsis. At the same time, he indicates each of these ways of knowing is linked with a distinctive way of relating intelligently to life. Aristotle's distinctions and Gadamer's treatment of them will be presented more fully in Chapter 1.

Part I is an examination of the specific arguments developed by Gadamer as he explains his theory of

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[9]Richard J. Bernstein, "From Hermeneutics to Praxis," in Hermeneutics and Praxis, ed. Robert Hollinger (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 290. Bernstein states: "I do think one of Gadamer's profoundest insights has been the linkage (or fusion) of hermeneutics and praxis, and his claim that all understanding involves appropriation to our own concrete historical situation."

[10]Three essays in Reason in the Age of Science provide a good introduction to Gadamer's understanding of "practical philosophy": "What Is Practice? The Conditions of Social Reason," 69-87; "Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy," 88-112; and "Hermeneutics as a Theoretical and Practical Task," 113-138. Richard Bernstein has taken special notice of Gadamer's dependence on Aristotle. See his commentaries on Gadamer in "From Hermeneutics to Praxis," and in Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), especially 38 and 145-61.

hermeneutics. Chapter 1 is devoted to Gadamer's general hermeneutics. Chapter 2 examines Gadamer's specific reference to biblical hermeneutics. Gadamer sees biblical hermeneutics as identical with his more general hermeneutical theory, but he also deals specifically with the questions of authority and normativity within the Christian community when he discusses the Bible. Chapter 3 is a discussion of the contributions and limitations of Gadamer's approach to hermeneutics in relation to education, and specifically religious education. Gadamer's hermeneutic contains reflections upon the nature of a hermeneutical community which can enhance the understanding of Christian religious education in the congregation.[11]

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[11]Bernstein, <u>Beyond Objectivism and Relativism</u>, 157-59. <u>Passim</u> suggests some of the implications of Gadamer's hermeneutics for the nature of such communities.

CHAPTER 1

Gadamer's General Hermeneutical Theory

Gadamer's major work, Truth and Method, challenges the hermeneutical theories that have dominated the discussion in philosophy since the Enlightenment. The major components of his general hermeneutic include his critique of Method, his concept of understanding, the importance of his twin concepts of effective-historical consciousness and the fusion of horizons, his unique discussion of the role of prejudice, and the centrality of tradition. Each of these categories marks a portion of his contribution to philosophy in general, and to philosophical hermeneutics in particular.

Critique of Method

One of the central issues addressed in Gadamer's work, especially in Truth and Method, is his decisive critique of the pervasive influence of scientific method. Several commentaries on his work have suggested the title of Gadamer's masterwork might be more accurately given as "Truth or Method" or "Truth versus Method."[1]

Gadamer's criticism of the hermeneutic of the human

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[1]Ricoeur, "The Task of Hermeneutics," 60-61; Weinsheimer, xi; and Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, 115. Brice R. Wachterhauser, "Must We Be What We Say? Gadamer on Truth in the Human Sciences," in Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy, ed. Brice R. Wachterhauser (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), 219; David Ingram, "Hermeneutics and Truth" in Hermeneutics and Praxis, 32-53; and Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, 151 all comment on the surprisingly small amount of time spent on discussing "truth" in Truth and Method.

sciences, is based on what he sees as the false assumption that the only method appropriate to these sciences is the method employed by the natural sciences. His critique of method centers around three separate but interrelated philosophical developments: the pervasive rationalism and objectivism of the Enlightenment, the "psychologizing" move of Schleiermacher's Romantic hermeneutics, and the historicism he associates with the work of Wilhelm Dilthey.

The Enlightenment and "Cartesian Anxiety"

In the second part of Truth and Method, which he entitles "The Extension of the Question of Truth to Understanding in the Human Sciences," Gadamer presents a thorough examination of the problem of method.[2] According to Richard Bernstein, Gadamer is primarily concerned with what the former calls the "latent Cartesianism" implied in this method.[3] Descartes is one of the founders of the philosophical tradition that ushered in the era of the Enlightenment, and he introduced a form of objectivism that has dominated philosophical hermeneutics since the seventeenth century. Bernstein offers the following description of the character of this "Cartesian persuasion":

> The idea of a basic dichotomy between the subjective and the objective; the conception of knowledge as being a correct representation of what is objective; the conviction that human reason can completely free itself of bias, prejudice, and tradition; the idea of a universal method

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[2]Gadamer, Truth and Method, 153-341.

[3]Bernstein, "From Hermeneutics to Praxis," 273-74.

by which we can first secure firm foundations of knowledge and then build the edifice of a universal science; the belief that by the power of self-reflection we can transcend our historical context and horizon and know things as they really are in themselves-- all of these concepts are subjected to sustained criticism by Gadamer.[4]

Descartes' search for a universal science was based upon the assumption that a basic, irrefutable distinction existed between the subject and the object, and that any attempt by a subject (an "I") to grasp an object (particularly a concept or idea) must involve the "activity of intellectual self-purification," this work of self-purification is the Cartesian method.[5] Self-purification involves bracketing anything that might be doubted; reason alone becomes the measure of truth in his method.[6]

Thus Gadamer claims "the real consequence of the enlightenment is... the subjection of all authority to reason."[7] The result of the Enlightenment was a rejection of all prejudices and biases. The absolute authority of reason

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[4]Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, 36.

[5]The quotation is Bernstein's characterization of Descartes' method, ibid., 116.

[6]Ibid., 116-17.

[7]Gadamer, Truth and Method, 247. See also "On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection," in Philosophical Hermeneutics, 33, where Gadamer states,

I cannot accept the assertion that reason and authority are abstract antitheses, as the emancipatory Enlightenment did. Rather, I assert that they stand in a basically ambivalent relation, a relation I think should be explored rather than casually accepting the antithesis as a 'fundamental conviction.'

and self-consciousness was considered inconsistent with any prejudgement. Gadamer decries the Enlightenment's "prejudice against prejudice."[8] This era's doubt of tradition, dogma, the church, and Scripture may be attributed, at least in part, to the polemic of Descartes.[9]

Gadamer attacks what he perceives as the monolithic character of this method. "What one calls method in modern science is everywhere one and the same, and only displays itself in an especially exemplary manner in the natural sciences."[10] Gadamer reminds us that one cannot doubt everything. Joel Weinsheimer suggests:

> Thus Descartes' project of a radical beginning is doomed to failure. Instead of beginning, we are always in the midst of an ongoing process; if we can know more, that is because we understand something already, pre-reflectively.... no method can pretend to be perfectly foundational or perfectly free of prejudices.[11]

Descartes made a radical separation between the subject

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[8]Gadamer, <u>Truth and Method</u>, 240.

[9]Ibid. Here Gadamer disputes the claim of scientific knowledge and its asumption of "absolute reason": "Modern science, in adopting this principle (of discrediting prejudice), is following the rule of Cartesian doubt of accepting nothing as certain which can in any way be doubted, and the idea of method adheres to this requirement."

[10]Ibid., 9. It is noteworthy, however, that Bernstein criticizes Gadamer for having his own monolithic view of science. As Bernstein notes, contemporary philosophies of science also question the issue of absolute certainty in scientific method, and have developed their own hermeneutics of science. See, for example, <u>Beyond Objectivism and Relativism</u>, 169-71.

[11]Weinsheimer, 10-11.

and the object. This dichotomy, which Gadamer calls Fremdheit, is "the condition of being no longer at home in the world."[12] This dichotomy between subject and object denies the important role of the subject in the act of understanding.

Gadamer seeks to reassert the role of the subject by speaking of "the belongingness between subject and object."[13] His alternative proposal is more dialogical in nature: "We are simply following an internal necessity of the thing itself if we go beyond the idea of the object and the objectivity of understanding, towards the idea of the coordination of subject and object."[14] The subject and object are not opposed to each other in Gadamer's hermeneutic; rather, subject and object share together in the common act of the "coming into being of meaning."[15]

In place of the Enlightenment's dichotomy between subject and object, Gadamer speaks of understanding as a dialogical act between equal partners. For Gadamer, hermeneutics involves a conversation between persons who engage in the "to-and-fro motion" of making sense of the subject being discussed.[16] In place of the domination of reason and the opposition between

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[12]Ibid., 4.

[13]Gadamer, Truth and Method, 418.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Ibid., 125.

[16]Ibid., 94. See his discussion of the role of play in understanding in "Play As the Clue to Ontological Explanation," in Truth and Method, 91-119.

subject and object, Gadamer proposes conversation and dialogue as the process by which subject and object interrelate with each other. Against the objectivism of the Enlightenment, Gadamer claims "The person with understanding does not know and judge as one who stands apart and unaffected; but rather, as one united by a specific bond with the other, he thinks with the other and undergoes the situation with him."[17]

Schleiermacher's "Psychologizing" Movement in Hermeneutics

Romanticism reverses the Enlightenment's emphasis upon the absolute authority of reason; in Romanticism, tradition also has authoritative status.[18] Schleiermacher appeals to the authority of Scripture for the Christian faith, although his understanding of Scripture is still influenced by the rationality of the Enlightenment; thus, his hermeneutical method utilizes the model of the scientific method as it is applied to biblical interpretation. His hermeneutical system

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[17]Ibid., 288. See also Gadamer, "On the Problem of Self-Understanding," in Philosophical Hermeneutics, 46-47, where he claims Spinoza's application of this scientific suspicion to Scripture was the origin of the historical-critical approach to Scripture.

[18]See Gadamer, Truth and Method, 249, where he states:

Here we can find support in the romantic criticism of the enlightenment; for there is one form of authority particularly defended by romanticism, namely tradition.... And in fact we owe to romanticism this correction of the enlightenment, that tradition has a justification that is outside the arguments of reason and in a large measure determines our institutions and our attitudes.

is a "romantic mirror image of the enlightenment."[19] His attempt is not to understand the objective meaning of the text, but the mind of the author.

According to Schleiermacher, interpretation of a text becomes necessary when the temporal and situational distance between the interpreter and the author creates a situation of misunderstanding.[20] His "science of linguistic understanding...seeks to go beyond the concept of hermeneutics as an aggregate of rules and to make hermeneutics systematically coherent, a science which describes the conditions for understanding in all dialogue."[21] This "general hermeneutics" is an effort to avoid the inevitable misunderstandings that result from the historical distance between text and interpreter. David Linge suggests:

> For Schleiermacher, therefore, what the text really means is not at all what it "seems" to say to us directly. Rather, its meaning must be recovered by a disciplined reconstruction of the historical situation or life-context in which it originated. Only a critical, methodologically controlled interpretation can reveal the author's meaning to us. Thus the way was cleared for making all valid

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[19]Ibid., 243.

[20]See Friedrich Schleiermacher, Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts, ed. Heinz Kimmerle, trans. James Duke and Jack Forstman (Missoula, Mont: Scholars Press, 1977), 109-10, where Schleiermacher states "The more lax practice of the art of understanding proceeds on the assumption that understanding arises naturally.... The more rigorous practice proceeds on the assumption that misunderstanding arises naturally, and that understanding must be intended and sought at each point."

[21]Palmer, 41.

understanding the product of a discipline.[22]

Schleiermacher contends that the purpose of interpretation is to clear up concepts the author of the text might have left unsaid or unclear. Such omissions lead to the misunderstanding that makes interpretation necessary:

> The task is to be formulated as follows: "To understand the text at first as well as and then even better than its author." Since we have no direct knowledge of what was in the author's mind, we must try to become aware of many things of which he himself may have been unconcsious, except insofar as he reflects on his own work and becomes his own reader. Moreover, with respect to the objective aspects, the author had no data other than we have.[23]

This attempt to "understand the text... better than its author" is the major effort of his hermeneutics. Schleiermacher resolves the temporal distance between the text and the interpreter by a two-step method that first attempts to be clear about the way language itself is used in the text (the "grammatical" moment) and then attempts to focus on the intention of the author of the text in question (the "psychologizing" moment). His restoration of the subjective moment in the interpretation of the text is a positive answer to the objective hermeneutics of the Enlightenment. Schleiermacher does not consider it sufficient to focus solely on what the text itself says; he attempts to discover what the author meant to say. Schleiermacher focuses on the mind of the author in his attempt to overcome the misunderstanding he

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[22]Linge, xiii.

[23]Ibid., 112.

considers inevitable in interpretation.

Gadamer criticizes the "general hermeneutics" developed by Schleiermacher and adopted by Romanticism in general for being too universal in nature. He claims Schleiermacher's method is as prone to regard itself as the _only_ acceptable method as that developed during the Enlightenment. He disagrees with the assumption that misunderstanding is an automatic effect of a person's encounter with either the text or the tradition:

> Romanticism began with the deep conviction of a total strangeness of the tradition (as the reverse side of the totally different character of the present), and this coviction became the basic methodological presupposition of its hermeneutical procedure. Precisely in this way hermeneutics became a universal, methodical attitude: it presupposed the foreignness of the content that is to be understood and thus made its task the overcoming of this foreignness by gaining understanding.... Psychological-historical understanding took the place of immediate insight into the subject matter and became the only genuinely methodical, scientific attitude. With this development, the exegetical side of biblical scholarship or theology was first elevated to the status of a purely historical-critical science. Hermeneutics became the universal organ of the historical method.[24]

Schleiermacher's deference to the crucial role of the

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[24]Gadamer, "On the Problem of Self-Understanding" in _Philosophical Hermeneutics_, 47. David Tracy, in _Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology_ (New York: Seabury/Crossroad, 1975), 74-75 lists several approaches to biblical criticism, including redaction criticism, form criticism, and socio-cultural analysis, none of which is viewed as sufficient for an adequate theological analysis of the meaning of the text. Tracy contends two modern trends in contemporary hermeneutics show promise in this regard: an understanding of "event" and "meaning" in discourse (based on Ricoeur's work in _Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning_, [Ft. Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976]), and "the reformulation of the 'dialectic of explanation and understanding'" based on Gadamer's thought.

author in the act of interpretation had several effects. In the first place, his focus on the mens auctoris (the meaning, or intention, of the author) resulted in a distinctive understanding of the hermeneutical circle. The hermeneutical circle had been a popular way of describing the relationship between text and reader (or interpreter) for several years before Schleiermacher's time.

Secondly, his "divinatory act" attempts to resolve the essential hermeneutical problem that creates misunderstanding by attempting to understand the mind of the author, and thus, overcome the strangeness of the text.[25] In effect Schleiermacher's circle moves between the interpreter and the author; the leap he mentions seems to be a leap over the text itself. The text seems to function as the object that first makes the interpreter aware of the situation of strangeness and misunderstanding. In other words, it is not the text Schleiermacher tries to understand, but the mind of the author.

Schleiermacher's hermeneutics seem to give priority to the interpreter. His claim that the interpreter can understand the author better than the latter understands himself or herself suggests a sense of superiority for the interpreter in this hermeneutical encounter. Joel Weinsheimer suggests:

> The superiority of the interpreter claimed by Schleiermacher seems to Gadamer an unwarranted self-aggrandizement, and one that is quite new to hermeneutics,

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[25]Gadamer, "On the Problem of Self-Understanding," 47.

even though the formula had appeared before
Schleiermacher.... In becoming universal, hermeneutics
became a method-- that is, independent of content. Not even
Schleiermacher would have claimed the superiority of the
interpreter's understanding with respect to a content, the
matter being discussed; but since, if hermeneutics is to
be universal, it must ignore content and focus on free
unconscious production not limited by the truth of the
object discussed, it was easy for Schleiermacher to be
betrayed into the smugness his formula expresses.[26]

Gadamer contends that one cannot accurately focus on
either the author or the interpreter in the hermeneutic event.
Instead, the interplay between the two in the act of
understanding is what constitutes this event:

The circle, then, is not formal in nature, it is neither
subjective nor objective, but describes understanding as
the interplay of the movement of tradition and the move of
the interpreter. The anticipation of meaning that governs
our understanding of a text is not an act of subjectivity,
but proceeds from the commonality that binds us to the
tradition.... Thus the circle of understanding is not a
"methodical" circle, but describes an ontological
structural element in understanding.[27]

Gadamer criticizes Schleiermacher's understanding of the
hermeneutical circle for the superiority it gives to the
interpreter. Schleiermacher's method assumes the scientific
method, already dominating academic research in the
university, as the proper model for hermeneutics in the human
sciences.[28] Gadamer proposes that the hermeneutical event is

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[26]Weinsheimer, 142.

[27]Gadamer, _Truth and Method_, 261.

[28]John E. Burkhart, "Schleiermacher's Vision for
Theology," in _Practical Theology: The Emerging Field in
Theology, Church, and World_, ed. Don S. Browning (San
Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 42-57, for a complete
treatment of Schleiermacher's attempt to make theology a
science like the other sciences in the university.

one in which both text and interpreter are partners in the act of interpretation. Unlike Schleiermacher, Gadamer does not give precedence to the interpreter; unlike the Enlightenment, he does not give full reign to reason.

Gadamer praises Schleiermacher for restoring the role of the subject in interpretation, but claims that his evaluation of the primacy of the interpreter in her or his encounter with the text is the major problem with his hermeneutic. Schleiermacher's hermeneutical method assumes that understanding is the "reproduction of an original product" and that this product is identified with the intention of the author.[29] Gadamer contends the mens auctoris is insufficient as the goal of interpretation. He claims that the meaning of a text always goes beyond the intention of its author:

> The real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and whom he originally wrote for. It certainly is not identical with them, for it is always partly determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence by the totality of the objective course of history.[30]

Gadamer suggests that the function of hermeneutics is more than this psychologizing leap into the mind of the author. Instead, Gadamer focuses upon the claim to truth made

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Schleiermacher's clearest statement of this effort is found in his Brief Outline on the Study of Theology, trans., with intro. and notes by Terrence N. Tice (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1966).

[29]Gadamer, Truth and Method, 262-63. He later states that "understanding is not merely a reproduction, but also a productive attitude as well," 64.

[30]Ibid., 263-64.

by the text itself. It is the message of the text, not the
intention of the author alone, that is the focus of Gadamer's
hermeneutics. Bernstein suggests that, for Gadamer:

> The task of hermeneutical understanding is not to
> (deceptively) convince us that we can somehow abstract
> ourselves from our historical context, or that it is even
> conceivable to think that by some pure act of empathy we
> can leap out of our situation and "into" the minds of the
> creators of works of art or historical subjects....It is
> the work of art or the text itself that possesses meaning.[31]

Thus Gadamer criticizes Schleiermacher for his reliance
upon a universal-- and therefore objective-- method for
hermeneutics as well as for the subjectivism of his
psychologizing moment in interpretation. Bernstein summarizes
Gadamer's understanding of nineteenth-century German
hermeneutics by stating:

> although it intended to demonstrate the legitimacy of the
> human sciences as autonomous disciplines, it implicitly
> accepted the very dichotomy of the subjective and the
> objective that was employed to call into question the
> cognitive legitimacy of these disciplines.[32]

Wilhelm Dilthey and the Historical School

Wilhelm Dilthey begins his philosophy on the foundation
laid by Schleiermacher. Dilthey accepts Schleiermacher's
psychologizing move and his _apologia_ for a hermeneutical
science "in order to establish their equal birthright with the

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[31]Bernstein, _Beyond Objectivism and Relativism_, 126.

[32]Ibid.

natural sciences."[33] Dilthey adds to this foundation an emphasis on the significance of <u>Weltanschauungen</u>, a recognition that a plurality of world-views is always available to the interpreter. Each world-view knows reality in a unique way and orients the individuals who adopt it toward a particular understanding of the world. Gadamer suggests that Dilthey's application of this orientation to philosophy results in relativizing, if not trivializing, philosophy to one "of the other cultural creations of humanity (such as art, law, and religion)..., which was capable of becoming an object of scientific knowledge."[34]

According to David Linge, Dilthey's "aim was to establish hermeneutics as the universal methodological basis of the <u>Geisteswissenschaften</u>."[35] Like Schleiermacher, Dilthey identifies the meaning of a text with the subjective intentions of its author. Also like Schleiermacher, Dilthey assumes that the temporal distance between interpreter and the life-world of the author of a text always has a negative effect on accurate interpretation.

Dilthey diverges from Romantic hermeneutics which claim that the task of the historian is to subdue personal feelings toward history. He claims the true historian never completely

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[33]Gadamer, "Hermeneutics as a Theoretical and Practical Task," in <u>Reason in the Age of Science</u>, 130.

[34]Gadamer, "Philosophy or Theory of Science?", in <u>Reason in the Age of Science</u>, 160.

[35]Linge, xiii.

leaves his or her own experience behind. Dilthey insists it is necessary for the historian to recognize that she or he is also a historical being. The understanding of history is possible only because one participates with others in life itself. For Dilthey, the reality of a common human experience within history makes understanding possible. Dilthey claims this "already-given understanding of life" allows one to understand the "expressions of life" to be found in great art and literature.[36] Dilthey's sense of history and appreciation for the aesthetic find sympathies in Gadamer's own thought, although Gadamer understands history and aesthetics differently from Dilthey.[37]

One of Gadamer's major criticisms of Dilthey's understanding of history is its tendency toward historicism. Gadamer states:

> Hence it was my purpose to show that the historicism of Droysen and Dilthey, despite all the opposition of the historical school to Hegel's spiritualism, was seduced by its hermeneutic starting-point into reading history as a book: as one, moreover, intelligible from the first letter to the last.[38]

He praises Dilthey for recapturing the role of the interpreting subject in hermeneutics. But Gadamer criticizes him for treating history as a monolithic object, a type to

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[36]The preceding is based on Palmer's discussion, 177-78.

[37]In the foreword to _Truth and Method_, xv, Gadamer acknowledges his appreciation for Dilthey's hermeneutics, claiming his own understanding of history is indebted to the breadth of Dilthey's philosophy.

[38]Gadamer, _Truth and Method_, xxii-xxiii.

which one may refer for facts and information about a long-forgotten era or event. By regarding history as a book, Dilthey effectively curtails history's ability to have any current effect on the interpreter. The world-view of the Enlightenment, for example, would be seen to affect the present only in the sense of offering a model for understanding the world in which we live.

Gadamer answers historicism with his concept of "effective historical consciousness" (Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewustssein), which may be translated "the consciousness of the effects of history."[39] Dilthey and Schleiermacher both understand history on the assumption of repetition; they assume that an interpreter can repeat the experience or intention of the author of a text. Thus, the best interpretation of a text is the one that most accurately, and most scientifically, reproduces the original event described by the author of the text.

For Gadamer, history is not an object to be studied as much as it is a description of the ontological nature of humanity. We are historical beings. We live in, and are constituted by, our existence within history. There is, therefore, no way to transcend history and view it as

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[39]Ricoeur, "The Task of Hermeneutics," 61, renders this term "the consciousness of the history of effects." Dale Stover, "Linguisticality and Theology: Applying the Hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer," Studies in Religion 5, no. 1 (1975-76): 36, refers to Wirkungsgeschichte as "radical historicality."

objectively as either Dilthey or his Romantic predecessors Droysen and von Ranke propose. For Gadamer, this means that "all of human experience and human understanding is thoroughly finite. Radical historicality means that men are forever bound to a tradition-in-process, and the grasp for an absolute understanding is futile, meaningless."[40]

William Schweiker contrasts the approach to history based upon repetition with what he describes as Gadamer's "mimetic... performative... figurative" approach.[41] Dilthey understands history by means of the scientific method of historical criticism. Gadamer believes that there is a way of knowing art, philosophy, religion, and history that transcends the scientific method.

For Gadamer, the proper focus of history is not upon pure reason (Descartes and Kant), or upon a subjective or psychological leap into the mind of the author (Schleiermacher), or upon the application of the science of history to a historical text (Dilthey); the accent is upon the subject matter (die Sache) of the text itself and the claim that subject matter makes upon one's own perspective or "horizon." Interpretation is an event, not a method.

In his discussion of Dilthey's concern with both self-

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[40]Stover, 36.

[41]William Schweiker, "Sacrifice, Interpretation, and the Sacred: The Import of Gadamer and Girard for Religious Studies," Journal of the American Academy of Religion 55, no. 4 (Winter 1987): 794.

reflection and autobiography, which he views as a privatizing of history, Gadamer states:

> In fact, history does not belong to us, but we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life.[42]

History presents itself to us in the form of tradition and language. Gadamer describes historicality as the "linguisticality of Being,"[43] and he claims, "Being that can be understood is language."[44] As human beings, we are more characteristized by commonality than we are separated by differences. Gadamer argues that we are all historical beings, persons who are situated within a particular history. The common fact of being situated a historical beings gives us a sense of belonging together that is basic to being human. The radical objectivism of the Enlightenment's rational method is countered by the commonality of experience enjoyed between text and interpreter.

For Gadamer the inappropriateness of using the scientific method as the only hermeneutical method can be exemplified in art. When one views a painting, one does not simply view the activity of the artist. What constitutes a work of art is not limited to the intention of the artist who painted it.

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[42]Gadamer, Truth and Method, 245.

[43]Stover, 39.

[44]Gadamer, Truth and Method, 432.

Instead, the subject matter of the work of art presents its own claim to truth upon the interpreter or viewer that transcends the mental or emotional purpose that may have consumed the artist when she or he painted the work. A dynamic interaction occurs between the subject and the work of art (although this interaction is not always a positive or a pleasant one). Aesthetic experience is not a repetition of the experience of the artist; it is always a new experience, a re-presentation of the subject matter of the painting in the experience of the one who views it.[45] As Bernstein suggests, each person who sees a work of art not only sees it in a

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[45]David Tracy in <u>The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism</u> (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 111, states:

> H.G. Gadamer among others insists, the actual experience of the work of art can be called a realized experience of an event of truth. (<u>TM</u>, pp. 73-91) More exactly, when I experience any classic work of art, I do not experience myself as an autonomous subject aesthetically appreciating the good qualities of an aesthetic object set over against me. Indeed, when I reflect after the experience upon the experience itself, shorn of prior theories of "aesthetics," I find that my subjectivity is never in control of the experience, nor is the work of art actually experienced as an object with certain qualities over against me. Rather the work of art encounters me with the surprise, impact, even shock of reality itself.

The role of art and aesthetics is pervasive in Gadamer's hermeneutics. See <u>Truth and Method</u>, "First Part," 5-145 as well as <u>The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays</u>, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

different way, he or she sees something different.[46]

Gadamer's rejection of the universal claim of the scientific method attracts much criticism. Richard Bernstein claims that Gadamer's rejection of method overlooks recent literature in science itself that suggests a less monolithic dependency upon this method.[47] Emilio Betti and E.D. Hirsch appeal to a renewed sense of objectivity, and they criticize Gadamer's refusal to develop a hermeneutical method.[48] In a book entitled Truth and Method, Gadamer never presents a systematic method of his own, and he spends precious little time directly addressing the issue of truth. Gadamer does not claim that the scientific method should never be used; his claim is simply that the stranglehold of this method on hermeneutics, history, and philosophy is inappropriate. Gadamer's interest is in describing the nature of understanding, not in developing a universal method for accurate interpretation of texts.

Gadamer's Concept of Understanding

Schleiermacher believes that the temporal distance between the author of a text and the experience of the interpreter creates a situation of misunderstanding. The task

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[46]Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, 123.

[47]In both Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, 82-4. and "From Hermeneutics to Praxis," 282-83, Bernstein suggests that many philosophers of science, including Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend have begun to develop what amounts to a hermeneutical understanding of science as well.

[48]Palmer, 47, 58-59, 67.

of his hermeneutic is to overcome this misunderstanding through the application of the scientific method.

Gadamer sees a positive value in the temporal distance Schleiermacher finds problematic. Gadamer embraces the role of distanciation in a dialectical relationship that uses the alienation itself to allow the subject matter of the text to speak again:

> The best definition for hermeneutics is: to let what is alienated by the character of the written word or by the character of being distantiated by cultural or historical distances speak again. This is hermeneutics: to let what seems to be far and alienated speak again.[49]

Paul Ricoeur states that one of the decisive contributions of Gadamer's philosophy is the way in which his concept of effective historical consciousness overcomes this alienating distanciation:

> (I)n spite of the general opposition between belonging and alienating distanciation, the consciousness of effective history contains within itself an element of distance. The history of effects is precisely what occurs under the condition of historical distance.[50]

Gadamer sees an essential connectedness and commonality between persons in every era, a commonality based upon a shared nature as persons situated within history and within language. Persons living within history are situated within a shared world-view or what he calls a horizon. He claims historical distance is one of the factors that allows persons

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[49]Gadamer, "Practical Philosophy as a Model of the Human Sciences," Research in Phenomenology 9 (1980): 83.

[50]Ricoeur, "The Task of Hermeneutics," 61.

to experience the otherness that is necessary for critical appropriation of the past in the experience of the present.

The Ontological Character of Hermeneutics

Gadamer shifts the focus of hermeneutics away from the Enlightenment, Romantic, and historicist emphases on the alienating distanciation of historical distance. Descartes' attempt to study the thing-in-itself gives the object being studied a status of absolute otherness over against the subjectivity of the interpreter; the object becomes a category with its own absolute truth claim, although the subject remains in charge of the event of understanding. Kant's alternative explanation, that one cannot grasp the thing-in-itself but can only investigate its phenomena, further emphasizes the role of the subject over against the object and strengthens the call for a rigorous method to empower this investigation.

Gadamer chooses to refer to the subject matter itself instead of the thing-in-itself. He places the emphasis upon the subject matter contained in the text which is disclosed in the act of interpretation. Gadamer speaks of the subject matter as an ontological category: it is Being itself that is disclosed in the act of interpretation, not an objectified thing.

Understanding is basic to one's being in the world. One can recognize Gadamer's dependency upon Heidegger for this concept. Like Heidegger, he emphasizes the ontological nature

of understanding and disavows the assumption that understanding is an operation by which one active consciousness gives meaning to an experience.[51] Gadamer claims that understanding is not recovery and repetition of _the_ truth by a clever use of proper method; it is an attitude of openness in which truth may emerge out of the interaction between two subjects. Understanding is less a method than an event in which one participates:

> Understanding itself is not to be considered so much an action of subjectivity, but rather as entering into an occurence of transmission (Überlieferungsgeschehen) in which past and present are constantly being mediated. This is what must gain acceptance in hermeneutical theory, which is too much dominated by the idea of procedure, method.[52]

Understanding occurs when one participates in the disclosure of meaning that characterizes the event of interpretation. The event character of understanding in Gadamer's hermeneutic is dynamic; understanding happens through interpretation in the intersubjective relationship between dialogue partners. This is true whether one is discussing actual conversation between two persons or the dialogue between a text and a reader. Gadamer's enterprise is more descriptive than prescriptive; instead of presenting a

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[51]Gadamer, "The Problem of Historical Consciousness," in _Interpretive Social Science: A Reader_, eds. Paul Rabinow and William N. Sullivan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 129-30. See also Gadamer's comment in the "Foreword to the Second Edition" of _Truth and Method_, xviii, in which he appeals to Heidegger's idea that "understanding is not just one of the various possible behaviours of the subject, but the mode of being of There-being itself [Dasein]."

[52]Gadamer, "The Problem of Historical Consciousness," 275.

technique for achieving proper understanding of a text, Gadamer attempts to describe what happens when understanding takes place.[53]

The event character of Gadamer's discussion of understanding is distinct from previous hermeneutics. Theodore Kisiel suggests:

> In Heidegger's terms, _Dasein_, human existence in its situation, stands in the 'event of unconcealment,' and accordingly understands. It is in this 'event' then, that the heart of the matter of the hermeneutical is to be found.[54]

In this event, understanding is not the operation a subject performs upon an object; it is, instead, an expression of the commonality that exists between the interpeter and the subject matter in the encounter. Schleiermacher and Dilthey recover the importance of the interpreter and her or his experience in the hermeneutical act; however, they make the interpreter the only active agent in the event. The text is a passive object to be examined and, ultimately, to be given its voice by the methodically correct interpreter. For Gadamer, the text is a fellow subject that actively interacts with the interpreter in the emergence of truth. meaning, understanding,

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[53]Betti and Hirsch criticize Gadamer on this point, claiming his focus on the ontological character of understanding never gives any clues for how one distinguishes between true and false interpretations of a text. See Palmer's discussion of the debate between these three, 58-59.

[54]Theodore Kisiel, "The Happening of Tradition: The Hermeneutics of Gadamer and Heidegger" in _Hermeneutics and Praxis_, ed. Robert Hollinger (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 3.

and, indeed, being itself.

For Gadamer, the Cartesian dichotomy that has so profoundly influenced hermeneutics and philosophy in general is inappropriate. He proposes a hermeneutical theory that is essentially intersubjective (what Kisiel calls "trans-subjective") in nature as an answer to the polarization of subject and object that had previously dominated philosophy. In many ways, the encounter between the interpreter and the text is only a fleeting moment, what Gadamer describes as an "intermediate product," in the event of understanding.[55] In interpretation, the interpreter is always confronted with basic ontological questions, with questions about the nature of being itself.

Conditions Necessary for Dialogue

The position advocated by Gadamer may be described as conversation or as dialogue. When two persons engage in conversation, a number of conditions must be met in order for the conversation to succeed. First, a commonality of language is essential. Lacking a common language, there must be at least the possibility that both persons in the encounter will understand the other through common translation. Second, the partners in the conversation must intend for the conversation to succeed; in other words, they must attend to the conversation itself and to what is being said in the

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[55]Gadamer, "Text and Interpretation," in Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy, ed. Brice R. Wachterhauser (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 389.

conversation. Third, the subject matter of the conversation, rather than the subjectivity of the partners in the conversation, becomes the point of the conversation. And fourth, the intention of either partner in the conversation does not limit the meaning that emerges in the conversation.

Commonality of language. Gadamer contends that, as human beings, we live within language to the extent that our very being is affected by our language. The fact of the linguisticality of human existence is one of the factors in basic human commonality. Gadamer intends to describe the role of language as the "air we breathe" or the "water within which we swim" as human beings. However, it would not be accurate to describe Gadamer as a linguist. He criticizes linguistics for focusing exclusively on how language functions within the text instead of addressing what the text intends to say about the world, truth, and meaning.[56] The importance of language is, for Gadamer, to be found in its function of allowing one to understand the world; it ultimately has no value in and of itself. Language not only serves as a tool to describe the world; we are constituted as human beings precisely through

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[56]Gadamer, "Text and Interpretation," 389. Carl Raschke, in "From Textuality to Scripture: The End of Theology as Writing," Semeia 40 (1987): 44, discusses this critique of philology by Gadamer, and states: "Philology, for example, cannot yield that elusive aim we call 'meaning' any more than vital statistics can give us an 'event.' Philology only discloses for us strands of historical syntax."

our use of language. We belong to the world and to each other through language; because we live in language, we have something basic to our existence in common with each other. For Gadamer:

> The nature of hermeneutical experience is not that something is outside and desires admission. Rather, we are possessed by something and precisely by means of it are opened up for the new, the different, the true.[57]

Gadamer describes the relationship between text (or event) and interpreter on the analogy of one subject recognizing the claim to truth and meaning made by another subject. The interpreter does not understand the mind of the other subject as much as he or she understands the subject matter that addresses both partners in the dialogue in the back-and-forth, to-and-fro movement of conversation that ensues between them in the hermeneutical event.[58] Gadamer argues that understanding is not the result of a subject standing over against a passive object, but the emergence of meaning out of the process of interpretation between two subjects, the interpreter and the text.

Intention of the dialogue partners. A second condition necessary for meaningful dialogue is the attitude of those involved in dialogue with each other. The dialogical process of interpretation used by Gadamer is reciprocal in nature. It

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[57]Gadamer, "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem," in Philosophical Hermeneutics, 9.

[58]Gadamer, in Truth and Method, 231 states, "Thus it is true in all cases that a person who understands, understands himself, projecting himself according to his possibilities."

always involves a give-and-take between the partners that approximates the game structure so prominent in Gadamer's thought. It is, therefore, similar to the dialectical method he learned in studying Plato and Hegel.[59]

Gadamer claims that the nature of dialogue is a relation between an "I" and a "Thou." According to Kathleen Wright, Gadamer looks to Hegel's master-slave dialectic and his understanding of the self-actualization of Geist "for the structure of an I-Thou relationship appropriate for the give-and-take of a reciprocal conversation."[60] She discusses three forms of I-Thou relationships that have been prominent in modern philosophy.

The first emerges from what Gadamer identifies as the nineteenth-century's decision to identify the social sciences with the natural sciences; this identification results in an attitude toward the object that is more I-It than I-Thou in nature. In effect, the Thou is viewed as little more than a tool or a means to an end. This approach is more monological than dialogical in nature. It results in an exchange between

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[59]See Gadamer's work on these two pioneer philosophers in Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato, trans. and intr. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980); and Hegel's Dialectic: Five Hermeneutical Studies, trans. and intr. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976). These two thinkers play significant roles in virtually all of Gadamer's writing.

[60]Kathleen Wright, "Gadamer: The Speculative Structure of Language," in Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy, ed. Brice R. Wachterhauser (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 198. The following discussion is based upon her work in 198-202.

an active subject and a passive, and ultimately voiceless, object.

The second form of I-Thou relationship discussed by Gadamer is one which acknowledges the Thou to be a person, but does not treat the relationship between I and Thou as a reciprocal one. Wright claims Gadamer characterizes Dilthey's historical consciousness by this category.[61] The basic problem Gadamer sees in this approach is that it is possible to give another the respect of personhood (or "Thou-ness") without allowing what that person says to affect one's own pre-conceived notions about the issue at hand. In such a situation, the I could quite easily use his or her knowledge of the Thou's statement as a means of controlling the partner.

The third type of I-Thou relationship is more reciprocal in nature. "In this relation, the I not only recognizes the Thou to be a person but also listens to what the Thou has to say."[62] This type of relationship requires the I to listen intently to what is being said by the Thou. It requires being open to the possibility that what the Thou has to say may be true, and may affect what the I has come to believe about the issue at hand. But, in order for this situation to be truly reciprocal in nature, it is necessary to emphasize that the

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[61]Ibid., 199.

[62]Ibid., 201.

Thou may <u>also</u> be affected by the dialogue.[63] The dialogue Gadamer discusses is characterized by a constant movement of question-and-answer, give-and-take, to-and-fro self-presentation between the I and the Thou.

Gadamer sees the relationship between interpeter-and-text and person-to-person to be virtually identical. Both events are, for him, characterized by legitimate dialogue in which each is an equal partner in the conversation. Gadamer does not see temporal and cultural distance between text and interpreter as a problem. Instead, he believes this distance provides the dialectical tension that allows the dialogue to take place. The strangeness of this other voice in the dialogue, this other culture addressing one with its claim to truth, creates discontinuity in the interpreter's world-view. This sense of discontinuity, in tension with the essential continuity of historicity and shared language, pushes the interpreter to begin questioning the text.

<u>Directed by the subject matter</u>. The third condition necessary for the kind of hermeneutic presented by Gadamer is that understanding is driven by the attempt to understand the subject matter that addresses both partners in the

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[63]Ibid., 216. In note 30, Wright says,

> It is sometimes argued that Gadamer's understanding of a conversation with the text establishes the text as the authority and thus fails to realize the kind of reciprocity that is present in a living conversation. Here we should note that Gadamer assumes we question the text. Reciprocity occurs when we let the text question us.

conversation. Gadamer's version of the hermeneutical circle involves questioning between equal partners in conversation, rather than an active subject addressing an object. The play of conversation is between subjects who listen to the what, the subject matter presented by equal partners in the dialogue. The to-and-fro exchange of the conversational model is reciprocal in nature; each partner in the dialogue becomes something new in the interchange of claims to truth. Neither partner in the dialogue controls the dialogue; neither claim to truth is absolute.

The movement of interpretation between partners who truly listen to one another and allow the truth claims made in the conversation to affect one another requires a belief that all claims to truth must be regarded as relative and changing. Weinsheimer states, "That is, the whole truth never is but always to be achieved."[64] If partners in dialogue truly share with each other, the conversation will affect what they believe or feel about the issue at hand. True dialogue is essentially ontological in nature, affecting the very being of those involved. Instead of a circle, in which the movement of interpretation is self-contained and formal, Gadamer's hermeneutic recognizes the newness of every act of interpretation. The following figures diagram the difference between selected representations of the hermeneutical circle

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[64]Weinsheimer, 40.

and Gadamer's hermeneutical spiral.[65]

Models of the Hermeneutical Circle

ENLIGHTENMENT
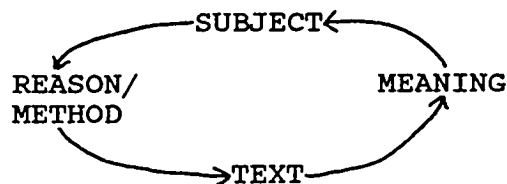
ROMANTICISM
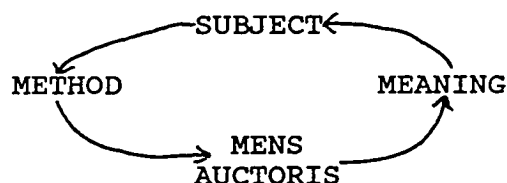
GADAMER
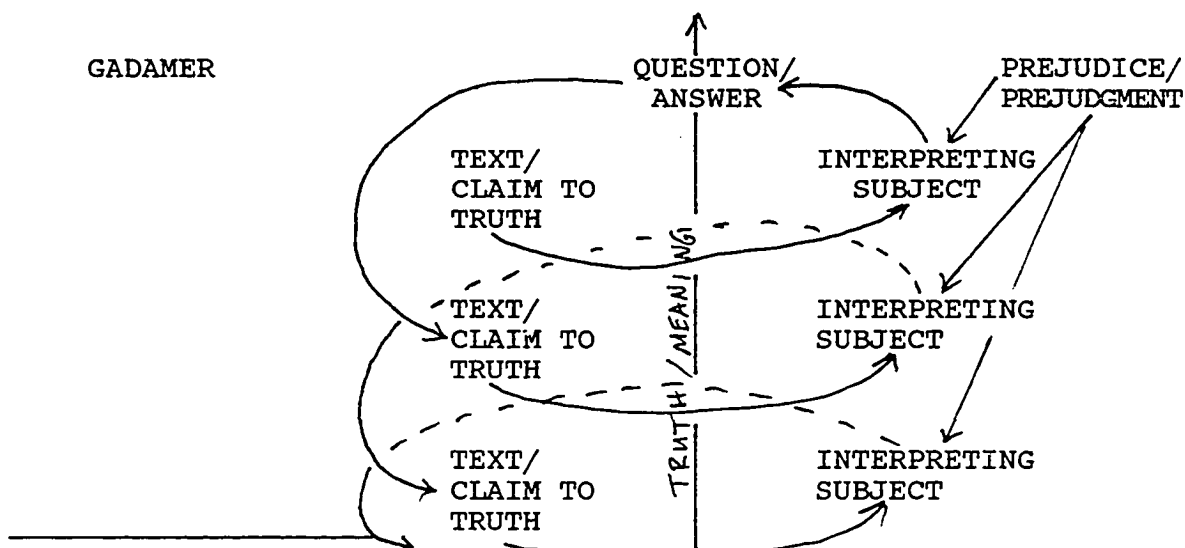
[65]Ibid. Weinsheimer also describes Gadamer's hermeneutics on the analogy of a spiral. My own recognition of the spiraling nature of understanding and interpretation comes from a number of other sources, particularly from conversations with Mary Poplin of the Claremont (Calif.) Graduate School of Education and from the presentation made on the "spiral of faith" to the meeting of the Religious Education Association in Toronto, November 1988 by Mary Elizabeth Moore of the School of Theology at Claremont. This model becomes part of the presentation of the thesis in this dissertation.

Gadamer's discussion of dialogue reflects Hegel's understanding of dialectic. Like Hegel, Gadamer sees understanding as the production of new meaning; to understand is always to understand differently. Also like Hegel, Gadamer contends that the emergence of this new meaning does not necessarily involve the negation of the persons or subjects involved in the conversation; these persons or subjects merely submit their own authority to that of the dialectic itself. In the process, the text or event and its interpreter are dialogue partners united in the movement of understanding. Gadamer believes the movement of understanding begins when one partner perceives himself or herself to be questioned by the other concerning the subject matter they share in dialogue. The focus of understanding is not on either partner; it is located squarely on the subject matter itself.[66]

The dialogical hermeneutic Gadamer proposes emphasizes the centrality of the subject matter over against the Enlightenment's centrality of the interpreting subject. Understanding results when both partners in a dialogue give their attention to the subject matter they hold in common, instead of to the personalities and intentions of either partner.

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[66]Gadamer differs from Hegel on the issue of metaphysics. He objects to Hegel's idealism, and especially his claim that reality is the self-actualization of Geist, or absolute Spirit. Hegel's speculative idealism assumes a kind of rationalism that makes human history the playing field of an absolute mind.

<u>Neither partner's intention limits meaning of text</u>. The final condition of conversation concerns meaning. As the partners engage in dialogue, the subject matter addresses both partners. The meaning in a text or in the conversation between two friends, cannot be described as the sum of the contributions of the partners. There is a "surplus of meaning" in a text; it always means more than the author intended.[67] When one converses, the actual words in the dialogue are supplemented by everything one knows about the other, the environmental conditions within which the dialogue takes place, the non-verbal signals that happen in the course of conversation, what one actually knows about the subject matter being discussed, and the tradition of interpretation relating to the subject. It is not sufficient to analyze the words being used or their semantic and semiological arrangements in the sentence and the text at large. There is always something in true dialogue that transcends the intention of its participants or the semantic function of its words.

The meaning contained in a text always goes beyond the meaning intended by its author (the <u>mens auctoris</u>.) Gadamer contends:

> That is why understanding is not merely a reproductive, but always a productive attitude as well.... what we are now concerned with is not individuality and what it thinks, but the objective truth of what is said, a text is not understood as a mere expression of life, but taken

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[67]The phrase "surplus of meaning" is found in Ricoeur's work <u>Interpretation Theory</u>. Weinsheimer, 8, also discusses this surplus, which he calls "hap."

seriously in its claim to truth.[68]

The implication of this suggestion is that the meaning of a text is never final. Meaning and truth emerge in the context of the dialogue that occurs in the interpretive act. One does not will the meaning of a text into existence by applying proper method to its interpretation. Truth is disclosed when dialogue partners open themselves to what is being said. One understands when one recognizes that one has been altered by the claim to truth made by the other, whether one fully believes that claim to be true or not.

Gadamer consistently avoids using the term method in describing his own hermeneutic, creating one of the great ironies of his philosophy. He consistently misreads the intent of the hermeneutics of both Schleiermacher and, particularly, Dilthey. His interpretation of these important theorists of hermeneutics seems guilty of reductionism. Even more puzzling is the fact that the attempt to demonstrate his rejection of the methods of historicism and Romanticism forces him to ignore the implicit method within his own hermeneutics. His method is dialogical and relational, and presents an intersubjective approach to describing what understanding is, not how it is achieved. His reluctance to claim a hermeneutical method of any kind is the focus of much of the

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[68]Gadamer, Truth and Method, 264.

criticism his philosophy has received.[69]

The Triunion of Hermeneutics

Gadamer claims that Romantic hermeneutics made a false separation among the three moments of interpretation of a text: understanding, interpretation, and application.[70] He says that the method developed during the Romantic era treats these three moments as separate, hierarchical steps in overcoming the natural misunderstanding created by temporal distance between text and interpreter. Gadamer faults Romantic hermeneutics for ignoring the third of these elements and proposes that hermeneutics necessarily involves all three. Weinsheimer suggests, "that hermeneutics is best understood as the triunion of understanding and interpretation with application in one integral unit."[71] Understanding is both a theoretical and a practical task.

Gadamer's articles on hermeneutics as practical philosophy present clear statements of his thought concerning the "triunion" of understanding, interpretation, and application.[72] David Klemm reinforces Gadamer's contention

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[69]Emilio Betti and E.D. Hirsch have been two of his most vocal critics. They have called for Gadamer to describe some method for distinguishing between true interpretations and false ones. See Palmer's discussion, 47.

[70]Gadamer, Truth and Method, 274-78 and 160-62.

[71]Weinsheimer, 185.

[72]The three articles referred to are "What Is Practice? The Conditions of Social Reason," 69-87; "Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy," 88-112; and "Hermeneutics as a Theoretical and Practical Task," 113-38, all in Reason in the

that the three elements of hermeneutics are three distinct but inseparable moments. According to Klemm, Gadamer claims that understanding already involves interpretation since there is no immediate understanding of another or of a text; the essential strangeness of the other always creates the need to interpret.[73] According to Gadamer, understanding always involves application. Klemm explains:

> If understanding actualizes a meaning in the event of conversation, the universal meaning and the particular event codetermine each other. Not only is the meaning concretized, the interpreter's own being comes into play. By bringing a meaning into a situation, the interpreter acts to become in a certain way. The event of understanding is the practice of the interpreter.[74]

Phronēsis and Application

Gadamer employs his background in classical philosophy by appealing to Aristotle's <u>Nicomachean Ethics</u> to counter the misunderstanding of the role of application. He claims Romanticism and Pietism speak of application as a subsequent step following the work of interpretation. According to these

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<u>Age of Science</u>.

[73]"The lack of immediate understandability of texts handed down to us historically or their proneness to be misunderstood is really only a special case of what is to be met in all human orientation to the world as the <u>atopon</u> (the strange), that which does not 'fit' into the customary order of our expectation based on experience.... there would be no hermeneutical task if there were no mutual understanding that has been disturbed and that those involved in a conversation must search for and find again together." Gadamer, in "On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection" in <u>Philosophical Hermeneutics</u>, 24-5.

[74]Klemm, "Introduction to Gadamer's 'The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem,'" 236.

views, only after one has understood a text by the use of proper methods of interpretation does one apply that understanding to one's experience.

Gadamer claims Aristotle's discussion of phronēsis provides a positive solution to the problem of how to understand application. Although he readily admits that Aristotle was not discussing hermeneutics, Gadamer finds the clue for his philosophical hermeneutics in Aristotle's tradition of practical philosophy.[75]

Aristotle's three ways of knowing. Aristotle distinguishes among three ways of knowing, each of which is related to a distinctive way of living, is significant for Gadamer. Technē is the way of knowing which is directed toward producing a tangible artifact or product. Aristotle relates technē to the work of the artist, the sculptor, the artisan, and especially, the poet. Technē is the way of knowing appropriate to the way of living Aristotle calls poiesis.[76]

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[75]See Bernstein's discussion of Gadamer on this point in Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, 40. Bernstein says, "According to Gadamer, not only is philosophical hermeneutics the proper heir of the tradition of practical philosophy, but the type of judgment and moral reasoning exhibited in all understanding is itself a form of phronesis." Gadamer attests to this importance when he states, "When Aristotle, in the sixth book of the Nicomachean Ethics, distinguishes the manner of 'practical' knowledge... from theoretical and technical knowledge, he expresses, in my opinion, one of the greatest truths [of classical philosophy]."

[76]Thomas H. Groome, Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 155, describes poiesis as "a way of relating to reality in which a concrete artifact or thing is produced."

Gadamer refers to <u>poiesis</u> as an "expert know-how in the sense of a knowledgable mastery of operational procedures."[77] He links <u>techne</u> with the scientific method he criticizes so strongly. He does not reject <u>techne</u> as much as he limits its field of expertise to the production of concrete objects.

The second category of knowing is <u>episteme</u>, which is the knowledge of what is universal, invariable, and demonstrable. The model for <u>episteme</u> in Aristotle's discussion is mathemetics.[78] This way of knowing is speculative, intellectual, contemplative, and reflective. <u>Episteme</u> is the way of knowing characteristic of the way of living that Aristotle calls <u>theoria</u>. <u>Theoria</u> is a state of being in which the person reflects on knowledge for the sake of knowledge itself; there is no end-product of knowledge other than further knowledge. <u>Episteme</u> and <u>theoria</u> are the categories in Aristotle's discussion most akin to science, especially the logico-mathematical sciences.

<u>Phronesis</u> is a way of knowing that concerns ethical know-how and moral knowledge. <u>Phronesis</u> is not understanding for its own sake; it is not a purely theoretical enterprise. Bernstein sees Gadamer's use of <u>phronesis</u>, which is a form of moral knowledge, as a mediation between a universal moral principle (such as the Good) and the particular situation in

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[77]Gadamer, "Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy," 92.

[78]Ibid., 91.

which the principle is to be applied.[79] _Phronēsis_ is understanding the way in which the universal and the particular co-determine each other. For Gadamer, the principle itself and the being of the interpreter are changed as the new understanding affects the way the person lives. Thus, Gadamer sees _phronēsis_ as knowledge-for-the-sake-of-oneself rather than knowledge-for-the-sake-of-knowledge-itself. He claims, "The person with understanding does not know and judge as one who stands apart and unaffected; but rather, as one united by a specific bond with the other, he thinks with the other and undergoes the situation with him."[80]

Phronēsis, praxis, and application. Richard Bernstein claims Gadamer's association of hermeneutics and _praxis_, which he accomplishes through his understanding of _phronēsis_, is one of the most significant contributions Gadamer makes to the field of hermeneutics.[81] Gadamer considers application an integral part of the process of understanding. He seeks to guard against a purely speculative definition of interpretation. He is critical of any interpretation that remains at the level of the universal or the ideal and never impacts the life-world of the one who interprets. Application is the moment within the hermeneutical process at which the truth and meaning that is the subject matter of the text

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[79]Bernstein, "From Hermeneutics to Praxis," 276.

[80]Gadamer, _Truth and Method_, 288.

[81]Bernstein, "From Hermeneutics to Praxis," 290.

interacts with the current life situation of the interpreter, here and now. Understanding is always a _situated_ endeavor; it cannot be speculation about an idea alone. It is always contextual, situational, and, therefore practical.

Gadamer describes the human sciences as practical-moral disciplines. Their investigations and actions are oriented toward a type of knowing that deals with the way persons live their lives under the influence of universal moral principles.[82] The knowing typical of _phronēsis_ is practical knowing, a type of knowledge appropriate to and constitutive of _praxis_.[83] As Bernstein has demonstrated in an earlier work, _praxis_ is not simply action.[84] _Praxis_ is the attitude of the person who reflects on her action and puts her theoretical speculation into action. Gadamer makes two points concerning the relationship of _phronēsis_ and _praxis_.

1. _Gadamer claims phronēsis is the way of knowing typical of praxis._ He believes _phronēsis_ "must arise from practice itself and ... be related back to practice."[85] Gadamer laments

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[82]Thomas Groome also speaks of an alternative way of knowing, or an epistemology, which he calls a "biblical way of knowing" in his discussion of "shared Christian praxis." See his Chapter 7, "In Search of a 'Way of Knowing' for Christian Religious Education," 139-51 in _Christian Religious Education_.

[83]Bernstein, _Beyond Objectivism and Relativism_, 150.

[84]See Bernstein, _Praxis and Action_ (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), particularly his discussion of Hegel and Marx, 11-83.

[85]Gadamer, "Hermeneutics as Practical Philosopy," 92.

what he calls the "awful deformation of <u>praxis</u>" that has resulted from the ready identification of practice with the idea of technique.[86] He claims that, in the past century, practice has been "understood as application of science to technical tasks;" the end result of this state of affairs has been that this understanding of practice "degrades practical reason to technical control."[87]

Gadamer understands <u>praxis</u> to be dialectical. Aristotle describes the origin of <u>praxis</u> as rational choice, an understanding Gadamer shares.[88] <u>Praxis</u> is not a way of knowing that is directed toward technical skill; nor is it concerned with purely speculative reasoning. <u>Praxis</u> is the way of knowing by which universal moral principles are brought into dialogue with concrete, historical experiences. <u>Praxis</u> involves reflection, but always reflection about the implications of ethical principles for the way one lives one's life, not reflection on absolute principles and reason alone. Gadamer's practical philosophy understands <u>praxis</u> as a constant interaction between action and reflection. He rejects

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[86]Gadamer, "Hermeneutics and Social Science," in <u>Cultural Hermeneutics</u> 2 (1975): 312.

[87]Ibid.

[88]Aristotle, <u>Ethics: The Ethics of Aristotle</u>, trans. J.A.K. Thomson (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 205. See also Gadamer, "What Is Practice?" 81, where he states, "Practice consists of choosing, of deciding for something and against something else, and in doing this a practical reflection is effective, which is itself dialectical in the highest measure."

the tendency to place theory and practice in opposition to each other. The dialectical interaction between the two states of being constantly transforms each. Because understanding is dialectical, one's praxis is always affected by one's theoria; one's theoria is inevitably changed by one's praxis.

2. **Application is not a subsequent step, but an integral moment in understanding.** Gadamer places his discussion of the question of application in a section of Truth and Method he entitles, "The Rediscovery of the Fundamental Hermeneutic Problem."[89] He is opposed to the methodological assumption that interpretation is limited to technical skill and its further assumption that proper interpretation is only possible in the hands of skilled experts.[90] Gadamer claims that, in order to understand a text, a concept, or a person's message, one must apply it to a concrete historical situation. He rejects episteme and its assumption that it is possible to reflect upon universal principles in a purely rational way. He is especially critical of the dominance of hermeneutics by techne. Understanding always involves interpretation; interpretation always requires application to present experience.[91] Understanding cannot be limited to what can be

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[89]Gadamer, Truth and Method, 274- 305.

[90]Gadamer, "What Is Practice?" 244. Here, Gadamer criticizes what he refers to as modern culture's "society of experts"

[91]Ibid., 283. Gadamer compares techne and phronesis and claims, "We learn a techne and can also forget it. But we do not learn moral knowledge, nor can we forget it.... Rather,

produced by technical skill or by the human intellect's own introspective reflection.

One of the most enduring debates in philosophy during the past three decades has centered on Gadamer's discussion of praxis and application. Jürgen Habermas continues to argue for the viability of techne; indeed, Habermas has consistently criticized Gadamer for Gadamer's rejection of the technical way of knowing.[92] Gadamer repeats his insistence that techne is not a sufficient epistemology for explaining human interaction or social relations. He finds Habermas' psychoanalytical social analysis to be too dependent upon technical expertise. Gadamer claims "the meaning of any universal, of any norm, is only justified and determined in and through its concretization."[93]

The most powerful critique offered by Habermas is his claim that Gadamer does not recognize the potentially oppressive power carried by tradition, authority, labor, and language. In essence, Habermas criticizes Gadamer for an apparent blindness to the necessity of a critical approach to hermeneutics.[94] Gadamer's response to this charge seems facile.

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we are always already in the situation of having to act... and hence must already possess and be ready to apply moral knowledge."

[92]Jürgen Habermas, "A Review of Gadamer's Truth and Method," in Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy, 243-76.

[93]Ibid., 82.

[94]Ibid., 272-74.

He claims that his enterprise is intentionally philosophical, not political or social. He is attempting to describe the nature of understanding, not address the nature of society. However, as Bernstein and others suggest, his excuse seems insufficient.[95] Gadamer seems naive in his unwillingness to recognize the potentially coercive effects of greed, ambition, and the seductive lure of power.[96] One must wonder whether it is sufficient to appeal to dialogue and the ontological character of understanding in the face of human sinfulness.

A Community of Phronēsis and Praxis

Gadamer's discussion of phronēsis has several implications for human community. He relates his understanding of phronēsis to its setting within Aristotle's discussion of the polis and the community that implies. The kind of community Gadamer imagines is a community of solidarity, dialogue, intentional and intent listening, and openness.

Phronēsis and the polis. Bernstein claims Gadamer's understanding of phronēsis is written with the assumption of the Greek polis in the background.[97] The polis, or community,

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[95]Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, 160. Here, Bernstein argues that Gadamer's claim to be doing philosophy alone is inconsistent with his intention of illuminating "the essential character of the Geisteswissenschaften."

[96]Gadamer addresses many of these charges by Habermas in "What Is Practice?," "Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy," and "Hermeneutics as a Theoretical and Practical Task," all in Reason in the Age of Science. The first of these answers Habermas most directly.

[97]Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, 157.

envisioned by Aristotle is a "natural living community."[98] The community necessary for the operation of _phronēsis_ is one in which shared laws and ethical principles exist. These laws and principles, not natural law itself, are mediated to the particular situation in the dialectical process he calls hermeneutics.

There are several problems with Gadamer's use of the _polis_. Bernstein is correct to point out that the _polis_ was not as radically democratic an institution as later historians would have us believe. Not all inhabitants of Athens were considered citizens of the _polis_; this distinction was reserved for the educated, exclusively male and free elite.[99]

Secondly, if the operation of _phronēsis_ depends upon the existence of _polis_, as envisioned by Aristotle, what happens when the sense of shared laws and ethical principles breaks down? Many have charged that Gadamer is naive in his evaluation of human society. He has not come to terms with the disintegration of social norms, the deterioration of relationships, and the devaluation of human life and meaning. The ideal community of the _polis_ does not exist in the late twentieth century, if it ever existed in a practical sense.

> The problem for us today, the chief characteristic of our
> hermeneutical situation, is that we are in a state of great
> confusion and uncertainty (some might even say chaos) about
> what norms or 'universals' ought to govern our practical

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[98]Gadamer, _Truth and Method_, 486.

[99]Bernstein, _Beyond Objectivism and Relativism_, 157.

lives. Gadamer realizes--but I do not think he squarely
faces the issues it raises--that we are living in a time
when the very conditions required for the exercise of
phronēsis--the shared acceptance and stability of universal
principles and laws--are themselves threatened (or do not
exist.)[100]

Nevertheless, the kind of community implied in Gadamer's

hermeneutic may be possible on a limited scale, even if it is

idealistic on a societal scale. The model of Christian

religious education as a hermeneutical community presented in

Part III offers some suggestions for developing communities

within which phronēsis may be realized. Gadamer lists four

characteristics of a hermeneutical community.

1. Solidarity. Gadamer's summary term by which he

describes the nature of praxis and the community influenced

by phronēsis is solidarity. He considers solidarity to be at

the very heart of practice, claiming "Practice is conducting

oneself and acting in solidarity."[101] Living in solidarity is

sharing in the values and world-view that characterize the

community of which one is a part. There is a sense of

belongingness, of having common social goals, traditions, and

basic expectations. As David Klemm suggests, acting in

solidarity means to "act so as to enable an open discussion,

excluding no one who brings good will to it."[102]

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[100]Ibid. Bernstein also makes this point in "From
Hermeneutics to Praxis," 286-87.

[101]Gadamer, "What Is Practice?" 87.

[102]Klemm, "Introduction to Gadamer's 'What Is Practice?'",
in Hermeneutical Inquiry: Volume II: The Interpretation of
Existence, ed. David E. Klemm (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986),

Acting in solidarity means participating in the community actively. Gadamer does not think of solidarity as acquiescence to the status quo. Instead, solidarity is an active engagement with the community's norms and standards by which each co-determines the other in the interplay of dialogue. The three moments of hermeneutics--understanding, interpretation, and application-- are all employed as one actively participates in the community. Acting in solidarity means that one uses a common langauge, common experience, and common understandings of the world as one engages in dialogue with the values of the community.

2. <u>Dialogue</u>. The kind of community described by Gadamer is characterized by dialogue. One of the major contributions he has made to the field of hermeneutics is his claim that we are, by nature, dialogical creatures. We live in dialogue with others as we share together in community. His hermeneutic describes the dialogue between person and person, between interpreter and text, and between individual and tradition as an encounter of play. Each partner begins on equal footing. Each partner is caught up in the to-and-fro movement of the dialogue. Neither partner is totally in control of the process, nor does either partner bring an absolute claim to truth to the encounter.

The community of dialogue is a place where persons may share openly. Persons in dialogue make themselves vulnerable.

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They are committed to understanding what is being said and responding to the questions being asked of their existence. Dialogue is not only possible in one-on-one, interpersonal relations; it is also the goal of an intersubjective understanding of community.

3. Listening. Kathleen Wright's discussion of the three kinds of I-Thou relationships in Gadamer's hermeneutic emphasizes the importance of listening.[103] The community Gadamer implies is one in which persons enter dialogue expecting the other to say something important. Persons in community expect each other to have a legitimate claim to truth. They listen to what is being said as a challenge to rethink their own prejudices and reform their own horizons.

4. Openness. The final element in Gadamer's understanding of phronēsis and the community is that community is characterized by openness. Persons living within communities influenced by practical wisdom are not closed and entrenched in their own world-views. They are open to the expanding possibilities of new experience and new meaning that results from dialogue.

The Happening of Understanding

What Gadamer is proposing is a model for human community characterized by true dialogue, by intentionally and intently listening to each other, by sharing between persons as an I in conversation with a Thou, by allowing the happening that

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[103]Wright, 201.

is understanding to take place. One does not <u>create</u> understanding, whether by intellectual mastery or mastery of interpretive technique. Understanding <u>happens</u> when persons enter into dialogue with the text as one subject in dialogue with another subject.

Gadamer's understanding of <u>praxis</u> and its epistemological counterpart, <u>phronēsis</u>, is naive in many ways. He has not offered a sufficient argument for practical living in the communities that currently exist that might help us develop receptive, friendly, mutual dialogue in solidarity with each other. The political and social structures around us are hierarchical, brutal, oppressive, and life-denying. Gadamer answers many of the charges Habermas and others level against him. However, the essential criticism remains: Gadamer's hermeneutic can easily result in social and political quietism and can easily become an intellectual grounding for the status quo.[104]

One further point of criticism is in order. Gadamer's discussion of <u>praxis</u> should be placed in the context of his ongoing discussion of understanding and his reflections on knowing (<u>phronēsis</u>). Gadamer's contextual and dialogical solution to the theory vs. practice dilemma seems to remain

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[104]David Tracy, <u>The Analogical Imagination</u>, 73-75, makes this same point, and urges Gadamer to hear Habermas' position clearly. Tracy also suggests, elsewhere, that Gadamer himself has created a rather monolithic understanding of application. See Tracy's discussion of the different ways theologians and preachers "apply" the interpretation of a biblical text, Ibid., 127, note 8.

largely theoretical. He seems to assume that <u>praxis</u> is identical with being caught up in the happening of understanding. Action is always action that is oriented toward the emergence of meaning for the present experience. Nothing in his system would necessarily lead one to link understanding with efforts to transform situations of oppression and injustice, since solidarity seems to imply that persons are socialized into the values of the community.

While he criticizes Hegel's speculative and idealist philosophy for being too transcendental and too metaphysical, there remains a sense in which Gadamer, too, remains almost purely speculative. When all is said and done in his approach to understanding, what emerges out of dialogue, the new thing that results from intentional conversation, could simply be new ways of thinking. Little in his hermeneutic would require the new thing to <u>act</u>.

Thus, Gadamer's complex and thorough discussion of how understanding happens provides an excellent description of the dialogical nature of being grasped by the claim to truth of a partner in conversation. Understanding is intersubjective, dialogical, related to self-knowledge as well as knowledge of the subject matter of the conversation; it is a way of knowing that differs from the technical and universal knowing typical of scientism; it is affirming, and an example of truly listening in an I- Thou relationship. On the other hand, understanding is also presented in such a way that it is

largely individualistic, quietistic, and speculative.

<u>Effective-Historical Consciousness</u>

<u>and the Fusion of Horizons</u>

Two of Gadamer's most important concepts help explain his understanding of history. In many ways, effective-historical consciousness and the fusion of horizons function as twin concepts. Both represent Gadamer's dialogue with Dilthey's idea of a multiplicity of world-views.[105] The first term may be paraphrased, "awareness of the way one is affected by history." Effective-historical consciousness refers to consciousness of the fact that one is always living within history, and is especially affected by living within a <u>particular</u> history. Because we are beings who are situated within history, we cannot escape its effects; Gadamer explicates this fact, and elaborates on the process by which one becomes aware of these effects.

The second term, the fusion of horizons, refers to the way Gadamer discusses the process by which one carries on the dialogue with another, and especially, with a text. He begins this discussion by describing horizons as the unique perspective from which one makes sense of the world. Each person has his or her own horizon. The task of hermeneutics is to enter into the dialogue of interpretation in such a way that the horizon of the text and the horizon of the

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[105]See Gadamer's discussion of Dilthey's development of the concept of <u>Weltansschaungen</u> in "Philosophy or Theory of Science?" in <u>Reason in the Age of Science</u>, 159-60.

interpreter fuse together and create new understanding.

Effective-Historical Consciousness

Dale Stover suggests that "effective-historical consciousness" is Gadamer's "summary phrase by which he emphasizes that all of human experience and human understanding is thoroughly finite."[106] History cannot be purely objective; it always affects the individual who is situated within history.[107] History does not involve the study of the past alone; history includes the experience of the way the past influences and affects the life of each person. Indeed, Gadamer claims "history does not belong to us, but we belong to it."[108] Effective-historical consciousness is a complex term, which may be better understood if separated into its two functional parts: effective-history, and consciousness.

Effective-history.[109] History is not just a silent, passive object that remains in an unreachable past; it is a subject that has an effect upon persons in the present. Effective-history is the term by which Gadamer claims that the past speaks to one as a partner in a dialogue. The past can

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[106]Stover, 36-7.

[107]Gadamer, Truth and Method, 266-7.

[108]Ibid., 245.

[109]Ricoeur, "The Task of Hermeneutics," 61, has translated the German term wirkungsgeschichtliche as "history of effects." Dale Stover, 36, prefers the translation "radical historicality."

no longer be understood as an objective entity standing over against one, either as an expert delivering a final and authoritative word on a subject, or as a silent, passive object, like a book, which lies ready for the scientifically-trained exegete to determine its meaning. Instead, Gadamer claims that history approaches the interpreter as a partner, ready to engage in real dialogue.

Gadamer does not consider the temporal distance between text and interpreter to be an alienating factor in the relationship. Indeed, he claims that temporal distance allows the interpreter to identify the strangeness of this other voice and its claim to truth. Schleiermacher sees temporal distance as indicative of a sense of no longer belonging to the situation of the author of a text. Gadamer claims this distanciation points to fact of one's commonality with the situation of the text. He believes the fact of our essential belongingness as historical beings allows what he calls the happening of understanding to take place.[110] History always shapes us. Like Heidegger, Gadamer believes we are thrown into a particular time and place; we are not just generally historical beings, we are historical beings here-and-now.

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[110]Ricoeur, "The Task of Hermeneutics," 61, states,

> The history of effects is precisely what occurs under the condition of historical distance. It is the nearness of the remote; or to say the same thing in other words, it is efficacy at a distance. There is thus a paradox of otherness, a tension between proximity and distance, which is essential to historical consciousness.

Gadamer's understanding of time differs from his primary dialogue partners, especially Schleiermacher and Dilthey. His concept of effective-history sees the past shaping the present through the interaction between the claim to truth offered by the past and the dialogue established with the present experience of the interpreter. David Linge suggests:

> The temporal gulf that the older hermeneutics tried to overcome now appears as a continuity of heritage and tradition.... Thus the past is never simply a collection of objects to be recovered or duplicated by the interpreter and the text or event he seeks to understand, but rather what Gadamer calls an 'effective history.'[111]

Effective-history is characterized by an authentic openness to the other which, as Palmer says, "wills to hear rather than to master, is willing to be modified by the other. It is the foundation of the historically operative consciousness, the <u>wirkungsgeschichtliche Bewusstsein</u>."[112]

As members of historical communities we are full of shared values, common language, and dominant myths of origin for our people. Because we are essentially related as historical and finite beings and because of our common linguisticality we already know something about the subject addressed by the text prior to engaging in dialogue with it. This is what Gadamer means by effective-history. It is history that has already had an effect on us. For Gadamer, one is able to encounter the disclosive power of a text-event precisely

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[111]Linge, xvii.

[112]Palmer, 193.

because Being has an effective-history in which persons participate as historical, linguistic beings.

Consciousness. Bewusstsein, consciousness, is the remaining portion of the phrase; it contributes a reflective dimension to the effects history has on the interpreter. Bernstein states, "The task of effective-historical consciousness is to bring to explicit awareness this historical affinity or belongingness."[113] Effective-historical consciousness happens when one opens himself or herself to the past, allowing the past to become a significant dialogue partner. It happens when one becomes aware of the many places in one's life that have been affected by one's historical existence. The element of consiousness is developed as one reflects upon the ways history has affected her or him.

We share a common identity, language, values, and basic view of the world with others with whom we have been situated in history. We cannot escape the effects of history, just as we cannot change the time and place of our births. Gadamer states, "All self-knowledge proceeds from what is historically pre-given."[114] When one becomes conscious of the givenness of historicality and begins to reflect on the effects that givenness has on the way one lives, one has begun to live out of a sense of effective-historical consciousness. Indeed,

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[113]Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, 142.

[114]Gadamer, Truth and Method, 269. A subsequent section of this chapter will present Gadamer's discussion of prejudice.

effective-historical consciousness is a necessary element in hermeneutics; thus, he claims, "effective-historical consciousness is an element in the act of understanding itself and, as we shall see, is already operative in the choice of the right questions to ask."[115]

What is striking about Gadamer's use of effective-historical consciousness is that he makes the same claim for the dialogue between persons and the past (even with a text) as he does for the interpersonal conversation between an I and a Thou. He is able to make such a claim because he recognizes that text and interpreter are historically situated in the same way as persons engaged in a conversation. We are always in the situation; our knowledge, either of ourselves or of the subject at hand, is never complete. Indeed, Gadamer says that we can only know or understand history because of what we already know about the subject matter before we ever begin our dialogue with the subject. Without some commonality of language and experience between past and present, we cannot understand the message of the subject matter. But, how does this I-Thou relationship, this dialogue, take place? Gadamer's discussion of the fusion of horizons helps answer this question.

The Fusion of Horizons

Gadamer believes a horizon is the perspective from which one views reality and makes sense of the world. Gadamer's

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[115]Ibid., 268.

hermeneutic assumes that each person has a distinctive horizon
that defines the boundaries of his or her perspective on life.
This perspective is made up of everything one has come to know
and believe about life, its meaning, and his or her place in
this baffling scheme of things. Like a physical horizon, this
personal horizon describes everything as far as one can see
and describe in every direction, until the earth and sky seem
to meet to form a boundary that encompasses the person in
something solid and secure.

And yet as one moves, the horizon itself changes as well.
It does not remain fixed and immutable, but is tied to the
movement of the person from whose perspective this horizon is
constructed. Likewise, for Gadamer, the horizon is not fixed
and permanent:

> The historical movement of human life consists in the fact
> that it is never utterly bound to any one standpoint, and
> hence can never have a truly closed horizon. The horizon
> is, rather, something into which we move and that moves
> with us.[116]

Each new experience, each new lesson learned in school, each
conversation with another changes one's horizon. We do not
create our horizons; we live within as well as out of them.
There is, therefore, something permanent about each horizon:
the horizon is always there, always predetermining the ways
we will react to new stimuli. And yet, the horizon is also
transitory: it changes as we move through life and interact
with others, with new experiences and with new information.

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[116]Stover, 35.

One always has a horizon, but the horizon is never the same.

Horizon, then, is a temporal term, not a spatial one. Stover describes it as "the area circumscribed by a viewpoint" and claims that it "is to be understood not as the intentional structure of a subjective consciousness but as the tradition-situation in which one's understanding now resides."[117]

Bernstein says Gadamer's discussion of Aristotle is a clear example of what Gadamer means by a fusion of horizons.[118] Gadamer does not simply study Aristotle as an intellectual curiosity from the past; he allows his dialogue with Aristotle's thought to challenge and then expand his own horizon. Gadamer enters into conversation with Aristotle open to the possibility that Aristotle might say something _true_, something that may push him to re-think his own prejudices. Gadamer allows Aristotle's horizon to intersect his own horizon; the conversation between the two takes the form of the question-and-answer interchange brought to light by Socrates.

The fusion of horizons is dialectical in nature. The fusion is characterized by a merger of the horizons of the self and the other. A new horizon results from this merger, one that draws upon the strngth of one's horizon and the contributions, the claims to truth of the other. The process of understanding a text or a dialogue partner occurs as "a

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[117]Ibid.

[118]Bernstein, _Beyond Objectivism and Relativism_, 149-51.

fusion of horizons takes place in which the particularity of the horizons of both interpreter and interpreted is overcome so that a new, single, more universal horizon appears."[119]

Gadamer's Understanding of Prejudice

Gadamer's discussion of prejudice is closely related to effective-historical consciousness and the fusion of horizons. Prejudice is a basic prejudgment of the importance of another's horizon that makes the fusion of horizons possible. The linguistic nature of prejudice indicates that one must already know something about the subject matter for any dialogue to occur. History already affects one because one shares certain primary assumptions about the world with the past. Gadamer believes prejudices are inevitable. They are a primary part of what it means to be dialogical beings. "Prejudices," he states, "are biases of our openness to the world."[120] Indeed, Gadamer contends that prejudices "constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience."[121]

Prejudice as Anticipation

Gadamer's term for prejudice (Vorurteile) is most commonly translated prejudice or prejudgment. He does not consider prejudice a negative term. Instead, prejudice is a

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[119]Stover, 35.

[120]Gadamer, "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem," in Philosophical Hermeneutics, 9.

[121]Ibid.

description of what it means to be a historical being. Prejudices are constitutive of life; indeed, Gadamer says, "It is not so much our judgments as it is our prejudices that constitute our being."[122] This points to one of his major theses: when one approaches an experience with a sense of openness and anticipation, one recognizes the <u>significance</u> of the experience before one reflects critically on the <u>meaning</u> of the experience. Each person brings a wealth of information, opinion, and feeling about the subject matter to the hermeneutical event. This predisposition toward the subject matter allows one to recognize the element of difference between one's horizon and that of the text. We only recognize the way the text's claim to truth challenges our horizons because we already know something about the subject before we read the first word of the text.

Before interpretation begins, the interpreter already anticipates something of the nature of the event. He or she has some basic idea of the subject matter, expects to have a shared language, looks forward to a certain type of relationship with the person or texts in the event, etc. These are examples of what Gadamer calls prejudices. Without them, one would not be able to communicate, because there would be no commonality between the partners in the ensuing dialogue. We enter every event aware of the familiarity of our horizon

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[122]Ibid. See also Gadamer, <u>Truth and Method</u>, 245, where he claims "the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being."

and the strangeness of the other. The presence of the familiar
allows us to be questioned by the strange; the awareness of
our essential belonging allows us to recognize the other and
its word of challenge.

The Prejudice Against Prejudice

Gadamer's understanding of prejudice is not shared by the
majority of scholars. He traces what he calls the "prejudice
against prejudice" to the Enlightenment and its "subjection
of all authority to reason."[123] Prejudices were rejected in
the Enlightenment because they tend to be based upon
experience and intuition, rather than upon the facts
themselves. Prejudices are so much a part of the way one views
the world that they seem to defy empirical examination. Most
persons remain unaware of their prejudices. The Enlightenment
philosophers rejected prejudices and attempted to explore all
data and all experiences rationally and objectively.

Gadamer calls for the "rehabilitation of prejudice,"
claiming that prejudice is inevitable in human experience:

> What is necessary is a fundamental rehabilitation of the
> concept of prejudice and a recognition of the fact that
> there are legitimate prejudices, if we want to do justice
> to man's finite, historical mode of being.[124]

He recognizes the fact that there are illegitimate prejudices
as well as legitimate ones. He makes a distinction between
those prejudices that are "due to human authority" and those

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[123]Gadamer, Truth and Method, 247.

[124]Ibid., 245-46.

"that are due to over-hastiness."[125] What determines whether one's prejudices are legitimate or non-legitimate? Gadamer's answer is historical; those prejudices which have not stood up to the examination of time simply fall out of existence. Temporal distance exercises a filtering process that cleanses personal experience of those prejudices that have been judged false through time and disuse: "It not only lets those prejudices that are of a particular and limited nature die away, but causes those that bring about genuine understanding to emerge clearly as such."[126]

Gadamer's claim is well taken that many prejudices fall out of favor through the passage of time, whether through new evidence that proves them untrue, or simply through the gradual waning of interest that erodes the usage of the concept. However, he fails to recognize that many prejudices become solidified as doctrine and then reified as dogma. The potential for prejudices to become powerful oppressors of persons is not addressed adequately in Truth and Method.

Positively, prejudices are simply the "biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something-- whereby what we encounter says something to us."[127] As Habermas and others point out, many

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[125]Ibid., 241.

[126]Ibid., 265.

[127]Gadamer, "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Experience," in Philosophical Hermeneutics, 9.

inappropriate, powerful, and dangerous prejudices reach the stage of law, public practice, and canon and become almost impervious to attempts to dislodge them from their positions of influence. One need only think of Hitler's prejudice against the German Jews, whom he blamed for the economic ruin of Germany following the era of the Weimar Republic. Even though Hitler is dead and the Third Reich is long since buried in the history of the Second World War, the Nazi ideal that Hitler helped construct remains a poison that infects much of our contemporary existence.

David Linge alludes to the controversial nature of Gadamer's treatment of prejudice and to its contributions to Gadamer's overall view of history:

> It is not surprising that Gadamer's notion of prejudice has been one of the most controversial aspects of his philosophy. More than any other element of his thought, it indicates his determination to acknowledge the unsuspendable finitude and historicity of understanding and to exhibit the positive role they actually play in every human transmission of meaning. As prejudice and tradition, the past also defines the ground the interpreter himself occupies when he understands.[128]

Prejudice is the openness of the interpreter to the disclosure of Being which allows him or her to approach a text-event with the expectation that something will happen in the experience. There is a pre-understanding in hermeneutics by which the interpreter anticipates that she or he will be addressed by a question, and that responding to that question will involve more than simply gaining information about the subject matter.

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[128]Linge, xv.

Answering the question also involves self-discovery.

Finally, Gadamer contends that those prejudices that go unchallenged and become virtually codified within ourselves become a block to understanding, while those that are intentionally acknowledged provide the interpreter with the proper questions by which to approach a text-event. The recognition of one's prejudices allows one to enter into the hermeneutical event open to what the other has to say; only by affirming what one already knows about a subject is one prepared to risk her or his horizon and respond to the question posed by the other.

Gadamer does not claim that the horizon of the past is to be accepted blindly. The past questions us; it does not dictate to us. The overriding metaphor in Gadamer's description of prejudice and historicality is that of partnership. The dialogue that characterizes his hermeneutic is intersubjective and reciprocal. We question the past as often as it questions us.[129]

Prejudice is one of the organizing elements in Gadamer's thought. The recognition of one's prejudices and the attempt to differentiate between the legitimate prejudices and the nonlegitimate ones allows one to approach a text-event as one ready to hear and respond to the questions that the text-

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[129]Wright, 202. She mentions the frequent criticism that Gadamer gives all authority to the text in interpretation, and claims Gadamer assumes we will question the text. It is our willingness to be questioned by the text that makes the hermeneutical relationship reciprocal.

event will ask. Gadamer invites us to consider the relationship between our prejudices, presuppositions, and horizons as we approach a hermeneutical event. Then we will encounter the subject matter of the other and allow it to speak its message to us. Then, and only then, will we understand.

The Role of Tradition

Tradition has been understood as a body of material, a content, or a doctrine from the past which has been passed on from one generation to another. Tradition has been viewed as authoritative teaching, collective wisdom, or revered stories. All of these connotations of tradition share one thing in common: they regard tradition as a set of objective data from the past that influences the beliefs and behavior of persons in the present. Indeed, many Enlightenment era thinkers saw tradition and authority as two sides of the same coin, and they consequently rejected both.[130]

Tradition as a Flow of Experience

Gadamer understands tradition differently. He does not consider tradition to be an empirical object, but a flow of experience in which the interpreter stands:

> Gadamer's hermeneutics and his critique of historical consciousness assert that the past is not like a pile of facts which can be made an object of consciousness, but rather is a stream in which we move and participate, in

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[130]Gadamer, <u>Truth and Method</u>, 248.

every act of understanding.[131]

Tradition is closely related to Gadamer's understanding of prejudice and the fusion of horizons. Tradition is not something that is outside ourselves and stands over against us with an authoritative word. It is, rather, a part of us, and we are a part of it. We are caught up in tradition and are influenced by its horizon. At the same time, we inevitably affect the content and direction of tradition as we enter into dialogue with it. Tradition is, indeed, passed on from generation to generation. However, it is not transmitted whole and uninterpreted. Instead, we are caught up in the constantly changing flow of tradition as it moves through history toward the future. Gadamer's understanding of tradition as a flow of experience, instead of a transmission of information, has numerous implications for education in general, and especially for Christian religious education.

Tradition and Christian religious education. Mary Elizabeth Moore's discussion of the flow of continuity and change as the context of religious education is appropriate here.[132] She discusses three forms of tradition: Tradition, tradition, and traditions. The first of these, Tradition, is the gifts given or handed over to us by God.[133] Tradition

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[131]Palmer, 176-77.

[132]Mary Elizabeth Moore, Education for Continuity and Change (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983.)

[133]Ibid., 23.

provides the community and each individual with continuity with the past of God's interaction with humanity. Moore emphasizes that Tradition is not primarily the work of persons in framing the content of the Christian doctrine; Tradition is the self-revelation of God which becomes the experience of grace celebrated and elaborated by persons of faith.

The term tradition in Moore's discussion refers to the process by which God's gifts are passed on.[134] This tradition is dynamic; it moves through time and changes in each interaction between the past and the present. "Tradition," she says, "does not embody static truth that is applied in different situations. Christian tradition is ongoing, and the truth it reflects never stands still. Neither do persons or the church, which participate in it."[135] Moore's description of tradition is reminiscent of Gadamer's treatment of the subject:

> ... we stand always within a tradition, and this is no objectifying process, ie we do not conceive of what tradition says as something other, something alien. It is always a part of us, a model or exemplar, a recognition of ourselves which our later historical judgment would hardly see as a kind of knowledge, but as the simplest preservation of tradition.[136]

Moore calls her model of Christian religious education a

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[134]Ibid.

[135]Ibid., 22.

[136]Gadamer, <u>Truth and Method</u>, 250.

traditioning model.[137] The traditioning model she presents is dialogical in nature; she mentions Gadamer's philosophy in her discussion of hermeneutics and claims:

> If a traditioning model of education has a hermeneutical dimension, then education needs to be dialogic, moving back and forth between the many witnesses of tradition and the personal and cultural dynamics of the present.[138]

The traditioning process involves passing on the community's collected witness to God's gifts in the past, but it also involves transforming that tradition as the community interacts with present experience and is called toward the future:

> Traditioning requires passing on the past and looking forward to the future, for the sake of transforming our praxis in the present. What is more, the tradition itself will be transformed as persons encounter it anew and participate in it.[139]

Tradition is, therefore, not a fixed entity that lays absolute claim to the truth; it is a process by which God's continuing acts of grace are received and passed on as life-changing events.

The third category in Moore's discussion is traditions, which are the "vehicles of communication" by which the

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[137]See Moore, especially 17, where she says, " The concept of traditioning is based on the idea that the Christian community lives in its tradition, passing on its past, living in its present, and moving toward its future. It is ever linked to its past but is never static. Continuity and change are always linked together."

[138]Ibid., 81.

[139]Ibid., 121.

traditioning process is enabled and enhanced.[140] Traditions are the specific teachings which are transmitted through the educational process she calls traditioning. They would include such elements as Scripture, doctrine, rituals, and stories.[141]

The striking aspect of her discussion of traditions is that most persons would consider these vehicles of communication to be tradition as a whole. Those who have criticized Gadamer's positive evaluation of the influence of tradition have generally assumed a definition of tradition that is associated with the objective effects of tradition. Both Gadamer and Moore understand tradition as a dynamic process instead of the static objects by which tradition is passed on.

Habermas' Critique of Gadamer

Jürgen Habermas has been one of the most consistent critics of Gadamer's understanding of tradition. He is critical of the apparent naivete in Gadamer's understanding of tradition, and especially of the power and authority tradition has in community. He claims that Gadamer's effective-historical consciousness does not have a sufficiently critical dimension. Because tradition plays an active role in Gadamer's hermeneutic, Habermas believes Gadamer fails to achieve a truly reflective and self-conscious element in his process of interpretation. Habermas claims

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[140]Ibid., 23.

[141]Ibid., 24.

tradition has a coercive power over the understanding of the individual. Gadamer allows tradition to speak a word of challenge; Habermas speaks, instead, of tradition's word of coercion.[142]

The point Habermas is trying to make is well taken; Gadamer gives a greater role to tradition than many contemporary philosophers. However, Habermas seems to have misunderstood Gadamer's discussion of the critical function in understanding. Gadamer's characteristic term for his hermeneutic, effective-historical consciousness, emphasizes his realization that history does not affect us in and of itself; one's consciousness of the effects of history is the point Gadamer emphasizes. He uses the term consciousness in the same reflective, speculative way as Hegel and Heidegger. No experience has an effect on a person until that person has appropriated the experience through self-critical reflection.

Habermas disregards the critical dimension in Gadamer's hermeneutic because he wishes Gadamer to recognize the political implications of tradition. He is correct when he

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[142]Habermas discusses the educational implications of Gadamer's understanding of tradition in "A Review of Gadamer's Truth and Method," 269. Habermas claims that the authority of tradition can be used to legitimate the inculcation of prejudice. Dwayne Huebner offers a similar criticism of the authority implicit in curriculum language and curriculum theory. See especially Huebner's, "Toward a Remaking of Curricular Language," in Heightened Consciousness, Cultural Revolution, and Curriculum Theory, ed. William Pinar (Berkeley: McCutchan, 1974), 36-53, in which he also acknowledges his own training in Heidegerrian language and in Habermas' neo-Marxist theory.

claims that there is an implicit quietism in Gadamer's hermeneutic.[143] But Gadamer's positive use of tradition does not accept the past as <u>the</u> authoritative word on any issue. Tradition is always a partner in dialogue with the interpreter. Both tradition and the interpreter give authority to the dialogue between them, not to the claim of truth by either partner. Habermas, like Marx before him, denies any voice to the past; tradition is always a voice of domination and oppression in his hermeneutic.[144] Gadamer recognizes the power of tradition, but he is more concerned to demonstrate the role of the self-reflective individual in dialogue with that tradition as a factor in the ongoing shaping of what tradition itself will become.

Gadamer's point is that tradition is ongoing, ever changing, dynamic, and interactive. He readily admits that tradition carries a sense of authority; but it is the authority of one with <u>a</u> claim to truth, not <u>the</u> claim to truth. It is not authoritarian, in the sense that it coerces and dominates the present, as Habermas assumes. Instead, tradition is descriptive of the way the shared life of the community impacts the world-view of the individual. Gadamer understands tradition as an element in the way persons come

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[143]Gadamer ends "What Is Practice?" with a brief, but positive, evaluation of the bourgeois civilization that would make Habermas very uncomfortable. See "What Is Practice?", 87.

[144]Habermas, "A Review of Gadamer's <u>Truth and Method</u>," 269-71.

to conceive of themselves and the meaning of the their culture. He engages in a descriptive, rather than a prescriptive, enterprise in his discussion of tradition.[145] Gadamer is not attempting to say tradition is authoritarian; tradition is an unavoidable factor in the way persons make sense of the world. As he says, "Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live."[146] Gadamer rarely addresses the challenges offered by Habermas and others.[147]

Gadamer's discussion of tradition is best understood as the final step in a multifacted construction of Being, the other parts of which are the fusion of horizons, prejudice, effective-historical consciousness, and, ultimately, understanding itself. These five elements of his hermeneutical theory are decidedly philosophical in intent and in nature. The interrelationship among these components is complex, but

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[145]In his comments on an earlier draft of the dissertation, William A. Beardslee has suggested the fact that Gadamer's task is self-consciously descriptive instead of prescriptive is one basis for Habermas' charge that Gadamer is conservative and a naive traditionalist.

[146]Gadamer, Truth and Method, 245.

[147]In "What Is Practice?", especially 69-74, Gadamer presents a critique of technology and the development of a society of experts that reflects Marx's critique of technology. But, even here, the differences between Habermas and Gadamer are clear. Habermas identifies the source of dehumanization with systemic oppression and coercion; Gadamer claims dehumanization results from the extension of technologization from the area of production to the emergence of the society of experts.

it is necessary to examine each of them in order to gain an accurate picture of his general hermeneutical theory. Gadamer presents this discussion as his alternative to method.

The question is whether dialogue is sufficient as a description of the political realities of our era in human history. Bernstein and others have suggested that Aristotle's ideal of the _polis_ was only possible in the limited, elitist situation of Greece during his time. In essence, Gadamer's practical philosophy appears to be impractical and naive, given the pluralism and complexity of our current situaltion. Bernstein claims:

> Nevertheless, if we think out what is required for such a dialogue based on mutual understanding, respect, a willingness to listen and risk one's own opinion and prejudices, a mutual seeking of the correctness of what is said, we will have defined a powerful regulative ideal that can orient our practical and political lives. If the quintessence of what we are is to be dialogical--and if that is not the privilege of the _few_-- then whatever the limitations of the practical realization of this ideal, it nevertheless can and should give practical orientation to our lives. We must ask what it is that blocks and prevents such dialogue, and what is to be done, 'what is feasible, what is possible, what is correct, here and now' to make each genuine dialogue a concrete reality.[148]

The final reality of Gadamer's general hermeneutical theory is that it has significant implications for the description of human community and the ways it might be transformed to create communities of dialogue. The question that remains to be answered is whether his own theory is naive and unrealistic. Chapter 3 attempts to address this question.

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[148]Bernstein, _Beyond Objectivism and Relativism_, 162- 63.

CHAPTER 2

Gadamer's Biblical Hermeneutics

One of the distinctive characteristics of Gadamer's general hermeneutical theory is his discussion of the dialogue or conversation between the self and the other. Most commentaries on Gadamer's work refer to the playlike (even playful) interchange between the partners in dialogue. But Gadamer's move to describing the dialogical encounter between the text and its interpreter is one of his most significant contributions to hermeneutical philosophy.

Textual Hermeneutics as Dialogue

Gadamer compares the relationship between a person and a text with the relationship between two persons engaged in dialogue about a subject. One major difference, however, is that the hermeneutical encounter of a person with a text is more likely to create the need for interpretation.[1] The text has the character of otherness, strangeness, that begins the process of interpretation. Gadamer claims it is precisely this strangeness between text and its interpreter that creates the tension, the otherness, he considers a precondition for interpretation.

Werner Jeanrond reminds us that Gadamer considers texts to be the most significant aspect of hermeneutics, because the

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[1]See Tracy, The Analogical Imagination, 135, note 8. Here, Tracy claims "that the temporal distance between text and interpreter forces the interpreter to recognize his or her historicity...."

writing of a text is itself an example of self-alienation.[2] The process of writing a text differs from conversation in the sense that, once written, a person's thoughts cannot be revised in the give-and-take of dialogue. The words become alienated from the ongoing experience of the author. Likewise, the reading or interpretation of a text requires what Gadamer considers the "highest task of hermeneutics."[3] Like a typical conversation, dialogue with a text is characterized by the attempt to understand the subject matter presented by the text. Bernstein comments that, for Gadamer, "the conversation, questioning, and dialogue with texts and tradition is like a living conversation or dialogue." He quotes Gadamer's statement : "it is the common object that unites the partners, the text, and the interpreter."[4]

Differences Between Text and Conversation

Gadamer is clear that significant differences exist between one's dialogue with a text and a conversation with another person. He describes texts as " 'permanently fixed expressions of life' which have to be understood, and that means that one partner in the hermeneutical conversation, the

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[2]Werner G. Jeanrond, Text and Interpretation as Categories of Theological Thinking (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 19.

[3]Gadamer, Truth and Method, 354.

[4]Bernstein, "From Hermeneutics to Praxis", 289. He quotes from Gadamer, Truth and Method, 349.

text, is expressed only through the other partner."[5] Gadamer's analogy of conversation seems inappropriate when applied to one's encounter with a text, because the givenness and immutability of the written word makes it impossible for the text to be changed in the to-and-fro motion of dialogue. The dialogue, which Gadamer characterizes as a mutual sharing of an I with a Thou, seems not to affect the text as much as the interpreter.

In Gadamer's understanding of the dialectical process, neither subject in the conversation is destroyed in the process of interpretation. Like Hegel, he does not imply that either subject (for Hegel the thesis or the antithesis) disappears in dialectical encounter. Instead, something new emerges out of the mutual act of questioning that presents new possibilities for the partners in the dialogue. Thus the interpreter and the text endure in the event of hermeneutics. The text remains fixed, except that every new interpretation of the text becomes part of the tradition which impacts each new interpreter. Interpretation does not _replace_ the text, nor does it reduce the text to the objective status characteristic of the scientific forms of hermeneutics. The person of the interpreter also persists after the act of interpretation, except that now he or she must look at the world through different glasses. Each act of interpretation becomes a new element in the interpreter's understanding of the world and

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[5]Gadamer, _Truth and Method_, 349.

of herself or himself.

Gadamer emphasizes that the text is only an "intermediate product...,a phase in the event of understanding..."[6] The text does not claim to present absolute truth; it claims to offer new possibilities in the ways persons construct their understanding of reality, truth, and meaning. David Tracy states: "It is important to note here, however, that both text and reader (as well as their dialectical interaction) are realities-in-process, never purely static constants.... Interpretation is, by definition, an ongoing process related to these realities-in-process."[7]

The encounter with a written text obviously lacks a number of elements present in interpersonal communication. The reader does not have benefit of facial expressions, body language, gestures, and other non-verbal forms of communication that assist the exchange of affect and meaning in face-to-face conversation. There is no opportunity for immediate feedback with the writer. Nevertheless, Gadamer

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[6]Gadamer, "Text and Interpretation," 389. See also Paul Ricoeur, "What Is a Text?" in _Hermeneutical Inquiry: Volume I: The Interpretation of Texts_, ed. David E. Klemm (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 233-246; here Ricoeur argues for a clearer distinction between the _sense_ of a text (given by the structure of the text itself) and its _reference_ (determined by developing a methodology of explanation). A further helpful treatment of this issue is by Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" in _The Foucault Reader_, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 101-20, where he claims the idea of an author, as opposed to a writer, is a construct of the text and its interpretation.

[7]Tracy, _The Analogical Imagination_, 90, note 59.

contends the writer, especially of classic literature, recognizes the deficiencies of the written word when compared to the spoken word. As a result, the author depends on an anticipated audience in the choice of the langauge to use.

Text as Answer to a Previous Question

Gadamer claims that the text is a special case of the general process of communication, and that writing presents the subject matter in an interactive, almost timeless manner:

> Writing is more than the repetition of the spoken in print. To be sure, everything that is fixed in writing refers back to what was originally said, but it must equally look forward, for all that is said is always already directed toward understanding and includes the other in itself.[8]

Thus, understanding a text involves taking into account a whole range of communicative conditions. Gadamer's major contribution to the discussions regarding the nature of text, however, seems to be his claim that a text is itself the initial answer to a previous question:

> Thus a person who seeks to understand [a text] must question what lies behind what is said. He must understand it as an answer to a question. If we go back behind what is said, then we inevitably ask questions beyond what is said. We understand the sense of the text only by acquiring the horizon of the question that, as such, necessarily includes other possible answers. Thus the meaning of a sentence is relative to the question to which it is a reply, ie it necessarily goes beyond what is said in it. The logic of the human sciences is, then, as appears from what we have said, a logic of the question.[9]

Gadamer also contends that the hermeneutical experience involves the interpreter's willingness to be addressed by the

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[8]Gadamer, Truth and Method, 393.

[9]Ibid., 333.

questions posed by the text. Interpretation as a whole has the logical structure of a question.[10] Gadamer claims that the text and the interpreter both respond to questions about their claims to truth. The hermeneutical process may be described best as a dialogue in which text and interpreter respond to questions about the nature of truth here-and-now.

One of Gadamer's contributions to understanding the nature of the text is his contention that, in the hermeneutical event, the text _itself_ does not engage in dialogue with the interpreter; the metaphor of dialogue is inaccurate if one asumes the text itself has a voice and can engage in the same kind of dialogue as that among persons. The conversation takes place with the interpreter's _understanding_ of the text, not the text itself. Jeanrond claims "a text can only find expression through the dialogue which is initiated by the interpreter."[11] This implies that the text is meaningless as such; it only has meaning as _interpreted_ text: "... indeed, the special mark of the concept of the text is that it shows itself only in connection with interpretation and, from the point of view of interpretation, as the authentic given which is to be interpreted."[12]

When one interprets a text, one does not attempt to bring the past into the present; instead, "[t]he understanding of

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[10]Ibid.

[11]Jeanrond, 19.

[12]Gadamer, "Text and Interpretation," 388.

something written is not a reproduction of something that is past but rather the sharing of a present meaning."[13] The interpretation of a text, like the interpretation of a genuine conversation, always involves its application to the interpreter's present experience. Furthermore, the hermeneutical encounter with the text always takes place in front of the text, in the future, because the question and answer movement of dialogue calls into question what one will become, not simply what one has been. Thus, the hermeneutical encounter with a text, like the encounter of interpersonal dialogue, takes place as one is caught up in the flow of tradition. The fusion of the horizon of the text, which addresses one from the past, with the present horizon of the interpreter's experience does not remain in the past or in the present. The fusion of horizons always leads toward the future as each new interpretation calls for new action as well as new knowledge.

The Bible As Text

Gadamer's discussion of the Bible is drawn from his understanding of general hermeneutics. Yet the Bible also has a unique status in relation to other texts. Gadamer treats the Bible and all other texts the same phenomenologically; at the same time, he believes the Bible has a unique ontological character among texts. Because the Bible's primary referent is the Word of God, Gadamer ascribes a different ontological

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[13]Gadamer, Truth and Method, 354.

status to the Bible than to other texts.[14]

The Bible and General Hermeneutics

Gadamer proposes the universality of philosophical hermeneutics and makes it clear that biblical hermeneutics is identical with other hermeneutical approaches: "there is no longer any difference between the interpretation of sacred and secular writings, and hence only one hermeneutics."[15] Gadamer traces the origins of this universal understanding of hermeneutics to the Enlightenment and to Schleiermacher. The work of Spinoza and Descartes succeeds in stripping authority in interpretation from both the church and from the dogmatic tradition itself; reason alone is the sufficient authority in hermeneutics. The Enlightenment establishes a scientific methodology as the ultimate principle of biblical interpretation. The method applied to the Bible is identical with the method of interpreting every text: the search to rationally explain the text and assert the intention of the biblical author.[16]

Schleiermacher also places biblical hermeneutics within the overall schema of general hermeneutics. He reverses the Enlightenment's disregard of emotion in religious faith by appealing to the subjective role of the interpreter. However,

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[14]Ibid., 295. This distinction receives fuller treatment in a later section of this chapter.

[15]Ibid., 156.

[16]Ibid., 246.

his attempts to legitimize theology as a science alongside other sciences in the university result in an empirical, scientific methodology for biblical interpretation.[17]

Critique of Historical Criticism

Gadamer is critical of the pervasive influence of the historical critical hermeneutic of the Bible. He claims historical criticism is guilty of two major errors: in its attempt to make biblical interpretation scientifically rigorous, it makes the Bible a historical artifact that can (indeed should) be studied objectively and accurately. Also, in appealing to rational argument historical criticism assumes that the logico-mathematical way of knowing is the only legitimate way by which persons come to know. Gadamer describes the results of the influence of the historical-critical school of biblical interpretation: "When the methodological ideal of the natural sciences was applied to the credibility of the historical testimonies of scriptural tradition it inevitably led to results that were catastrophic for christianity."[18]

These catastrophic results include the modern dependency on method, which commands so much of Gadamer's attention in _Truth and Method_. But the most catastrophic result is to be seen in the disintegration of the role of the Bible in Christian theology since the advent of the Enlightenment:

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[17]Ibid., 290.

[18]Ibid., 19.

> [T]he critique of the enlightenment is directed primarily against the religious tradition of christianity, ie the bible. By treating the latter as an historical document, biblical criticism endangers its own dogmatic claims. This is the real radicality of the modern enlightenment as against all other movements of enlightenment: it must assert itself against the bible and its dogmatic interpretation. It is, therefore, particularly concerned with the hermeneutical problem.[19]

Even though Gadamer rejects the method of historical criticism, he sees no unique status for the Bible as text. The Bible operates phenomenologically in the same way as any text. The process of understanding remains the same, whether the individual is interpreting Homer, Shakespeare, or Isaiah. His lengthy comparison between biblical and legal hermeneutics is one indication of the universality of his hermeneutic.[20] He claims legal hermeneutics and theological hermeneutics differ from scientific method. Both legal and theological hermeneutics emphasize the centrality of application in hermeneutics. The law, in and of itself, is meaningless. The law is effective only as it is applied to the specific case. Likewise, theological concepts have no effect, except as they are applied to the experience of persons of faith. Both approaches differ from a scientific method which claims the method itself always achieves empirical truth.[21]

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[19]Ibid., 241-42.

[20]Ibid., 289-305. Also see Weinsheimer, 185-91, for a discussion of Gadamer's point.

[21]Bernstein, <u>Beyond Objectivism and Relativism</u>, 20- 34, points out that Thomas Kuhn, Karl Popper, and other philosophers of science have recently offered hermeneutical

Many of Gadamer's most severe critics fault him for never developing <u>any</u> method. Gadamer's refusal to develop a method seems to be a problem only when one looks at his enterprise phenomenologically. His grounding is in the philosophy of Husserl as well as Heidegger; Gadamer is well acquainted with the technique of bracketing the questions of truth and meaning in order to investigate the text as phenomenon. He claims the historical-critical method of biblical criticism has done that job well. Historical criticism has allowed the biblical text to be examined critically, while freeing this endeavor from the questions of right interpretation and dogma that has plagued previous generations. Many of the classical historical critics attempt to discover the truth in the Bible through their method. Historical criticism is directed toward bracketing issues of authority and doctrine more than in it is toward bracketing questions of truth.

Gadamer does not absolutely reject the contributions of historical criticism. Instead, he wishes to emphasize the need to re-examine the ontological nature of biblical criticism. The primary purpose of language in Gadamer's philosophy is to mediate Being; it is an ontological category, not an existentialist one. Whereas Bultmann emphasizes self-understanding in the hermeneutical encounter with a biblical text, Gadamer emphasizes the coming into being of meaning (in

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approaches to science as well. Gadamer fails to recognize that modern science also questions the dominance of science by the scientific method.

this case, the word of God) and the sense of the text. His focus is on the encounter and the process of understanding; self-understanding is an element in the process, not the focus of the process itself. In essence, Gadamer's hermeneutic is a disclosive hermeneutic, for the dialogue which we are results in the emergence of truth and meaning; Bultmann's hermeneutic is more a hermeneutic of self-understanding.

The Distinctiveness of Biblical Hermeneutics

Gadamer also emphasizes the distinctiveness of the Bible and biblical interpretation. He speaks of Scripture as the "gospel of salvation" and claims that:

> Even as the erudite interpretation of the theologian, it must never forget that scripture is the divine proclamation of salvation. Understanding it, therefore, cannot simply be the scientific or scholarly exploration of its meaning.[22]

Because the Bible is the word of God, it carries normative power over the preacher, the theologian, and anyone else who might interpret the Bible. Gadamer is not speaking as a biblicist here; what he means is that the message contained in the Bible, not the words of the Bible themselves, is the word of God. The Bible is not an objective, historical text locked in a silent past; it addresses those who read it with a claim to ultimate truth. The interpreters of Scripture are not free to interpret without constraints; they are dialogue partners who must take seriously the claim to truth that, in this case, is the word of God. The normative power of the

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[22]Gadamer, Truth and Method, 295.

Bible is not coercive; like other norms, it must be interpreted and applied to the experience of the interpreter, here and now, in order to be understood.

But what of Bultmann's claim that all understanding presupposes a living relationship between the interpreter and the text? Is the Bible authoritative in some absolute, universal way? Gadamer raises the same question:

> We may ask, however, what kind of presupposition this is. Is it something that is given with human life itself? Does there exist in every man a previous connection with the truth of the divine revelation because man as such is concerned with the question of God? Or must we say that it is first from God, ie from faith, that human life experiences itself as being affected by the question of God? But then the sense of the presupposition that is contained in the concept of fore-understanding becomes questionable. For then the presupposition would be valid not universally but solely from the viewpoint of true faith.[23]

The Old Testament is a case in point. Is the fact that the Old Testament is read differently by the Jew and the Christian a problem? There could be a commonality between these two interpretations on the basis of their shared understanding of the question of God. But is the Priestly understanding of God (for example, in Genesis 1) consistent with the view of God contained in the recorded teachings of Jesus? Does Paul's interpretation of the Law accord with the Jewish understanding of Torah and the God who gave that Law to the people? In what ways does John's doctrine of Logos agree with the Hebrew concept of Wisdom? There is, to put the

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[23]Ibid., 295-96.

matter simply, no clear agreement between the Old Testament and the New on the nature of God and the relationship between God and the people of God.[24] To base the claim to legitimacy for the Bible on a shared sense of concern about God once again places us on relative and subjective grounds.

Gadamer raises the question again, this time by hypothesizing the challenge of a Marxist to such a claim for the Bible:

> But what would a marxist say, who considers that he understands religious utterances only when he sees them as the reflection of class interests? He will not accept the presupposition that human life as such is moved by the question of God. This presupposition is obviously valid only for someone who already sees in it the alternative of belief or unbelief in the true God. Thus the hermeneutical significance of fore-understanding in theology seems itself theological.... it assumes that the word of scripture addresses us and that only the person who allows himself to be addressed-- whether he believes or whether he doubts-- understands. Hence the primary thing is application.[25]

The Bible is, therefore, valid only as interpreted and applied within the context of one who opens oneself to being addressed by God's message of salvation. Gadamer understands the Bible to function like every other text; it provides the encounter with a partner that raises questions about one's horizon and forces one to re-think one's understanding of the world. But the Bible is also unique in the sense that the ultimate dialogue partner in the interpreter's encounter with the Bible

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[24]Indeed, a close examination of the Bible reveals a plurality of views of God and of Scripture, both between the Testaments and within each Testament.

[25]Ibid., 296-97.

is God. The ontological character of hermeneutics is even more pronounced when the person of faith is encountered by Being itself in the Word of God.

The Bible as Dialogue Partner

Interpretation of the Bible involves the recognition that the Bible addresses one as a partner in a conversation. This insight is a direct challenge to reductionistic, positivistic, and scientific theories of biblical hermeneutics. Gadamer presents an intersubjective model of the dynamic relationship between the Bible and its interpreters.

Neither the Bible as text nor the interpreter is in charge of the playful encounter he describes in his hermeneutic. Instead, both open themselves to the other and are led by the dialogue that characterizes the triunion of understanding, interpretation and application. Both partners are carried along in the question-and-answer character of dialogue until the hermeneutical event finally <u>says</u> something. Understanding emerges out of the encounter; it is not determined through the correct application of method any more than it results from right doctrine.

The Primacy of the Question

Gadamer believes the main point of the hermeneutical encounter with the subject matter of the Bible is that hermeneutics proceeds as a succession of questions. If the Bible is a dialogue partner it cannot simply ask its existential question of the interpreter and then disappear

into a silent past. Dialogue requires that both parties involved have a voice, that each listens to the other.

Gadamer assumes that biblical hermeneutics proceeds as a series of questions between the interpreter and the biblical text. The question has primacy for Gadamer because he assumes knowledge begins with recognition of one's ignorance; one must first desire to know what she or he has not known previously before the event of understanding happens. As partners in a dialogue, the point of the interaction between the biblical text and interpreter is not self-understanding, nor is it the attempt to understand the mind of the author, nor is it really to understand each other. Instead, the point of the encounter is to allow the presentation of the message of God to emerge out of the dialogue. True dialogue seeks the meaning of the conversation. There are four implications for Gadamer's biblical hermeneutic when one focuses on the primacy of the question.

Biblical text as answer to a previous question. The first implication is that one task of biblical interpretation is to discover the question to which the biblical text itself is an answer. He believes texts are the written record of the author's response to previous questions of his or her understanding of the world. A biblical text is the result of a person's (or a community's) response to the actions of God in the life of the community. God's actions come in the form of a question; the text records the result of the dilogue

between the community and God in the experience of faith. Biblical hermeneutics must overcome prejudices and temporal distance to recover the question behind the text.[26]

The Bible provides an answer, not the final answer, to the Question. The second major implication of the primacy of the question is that the Bible does not provide the final answer to the encounter with God. Instead, the Bible provides the initial question about human existence that must be answered in the encounter with God. Gadamer emphasizes that, if persons truly intend to understand the subject matter neither the biblical text nor its interpreter can provide the ultimate answer to the question presented in the text. A dialectical question does not already have an answer; it expects the answer to emerge out of the play of dialogue. A dialectical question presents a possibility to the other instead of presenting a final answer.

The biblical text provides a possible answer to the question that produced it. For Gadamer, it is important to emphasize that this answer is only one of many possible answers. The dialogue between the biblical text and its interpreter ensues because the answer offered by the text strikes the interpreter as strange. It presents a view of the

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[26]Gadamer, Truth and Method, 305. Marion Pardy, Teaching Children the Bible: New Models in Christian Education (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 70- 81, offers a series of examples of ways the Bible itself reflects the attempt to discover and reinterpret the prior question of God's interaction with humanity.

world and of the activity and nature of God that challenges the reader's understanding of the world. Gadamer's emphasis on the openness of the question presents a distinctive understanding of the Bible. If the Bible genuinely engages its interpreters in dialectical questioning, the biblical text does not present a definitive answer to the questions behind the text. It initiates a dialogue with the interpreter which will eventually result in the emergence of meaning that makes sense here and now. Dialectical questioning results in "the working out of the common meaning."[27]

This is a different understanding of the Bible than one finds in historical-critical and fundamentalist approaches. The historical-critical approach assumes a fixed answer that has been crystallized in the text. The text itself does not speak; it is a collection of objective information from the past that needs interpretation. The exegete gives voice to this information by applying a critical method to discover the meaning that resides in the text itself. The fundamentalist assumes the Bible provides God's final answer for humanity, while claiming that the words of the biblical text are identical with God's message.

Gadamer disagrees. He claims that the Bible engages the interpreter in an open-ended dialogue, one in which neither the Bible nor the interpreter has the final answer to the question. Instead, Gadamer claims intentional listening,

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[27]Gadamer, <u>Truth and Method</u>, 331.

sharing, openness, and probing into the subject matter presented by the text allows the meaning of the text for the experience of the interpreter to emerge. The biblical text does not speak absolutely; its meaning is emerges as it is applied to the situation-at-hand.

The Bible presents an occasion in which truth may emerge. A third implication of the primacy of the question is that the Bible presents the occasion through which truth may emerge. One of the ironies of Truth and Method is the strange absence of direct discussion of the nature of truth until the final section of the book.[28] Fcr Gadamer, the Bible and its truth claims concerning God's word of salvation present the occasion for dialogue, not the definitive word on what is true. Truth emerges out of the dialectical encounter between the biblical text and the experience of the interpreter.[29] Truth is not, therefore, contained in the Bible as such; it is encountered as we open ourselves to the claim to truth presented by the

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[28]This curious fact has drawn criticism from many. Both Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, 167 and Ingram, 35-39, identify what they understand to be the latent theory of truth running throughout the book. Gadamer's understanding of truth is contextual, dialectical, and disclosive; there is no absolute, essential truth against which one is to judge the truth for a given situation. Instead, Gadamer believes the current hermeneutical situation provides the occasion within which truth emerges.

[29]Although Gadamer does not offer any criteria to determine which interpretation are valid, he does offer several ideals that might serve as a guide for interpretation. Wachterhauser, 234-35, suggests principles of comprehensiveness, depth, inclusivity, and architectonic structure as characteristic of Gadamer's approach to interpretation.

text. The goal of this intersubjective exchange is not to learn the biblical truth as an absolute demand upon us, but to discover the truth-for-here-and-now. Truth does not exist, for Gadamer, except as it is applied to the situation at hand. Thus, truth is a historical category, not a metaphysical one. Truth emerges as a new reality in every act of interpretation. Yet, truth retains a relationship with the past because it is limited by the direction and scope of the biblical text whose interpretation raises the opportunity for one's encounter with truth.

Questioning assumes indeterminacy. The final implication of the primacy of the question is that questioning assumes indeterminacy. Gadamer claims questioning assumes the question asked has not yet been completely answered. If the final answer had already been given, the question itself would be meaningless. When one asks a question, one is sincerely interested in the answer the other will give; the matter is not settled in asking of question, but rather when the partners in dialogue agree on a shared answer. That is when meaning and truth emerge.

This means that the answer to the question posed by the biblical text is indeterminate. The Bible is characterized by question, more than by proclamation. This implies an openness in the nature of the Bible that differs from the kerygmatic

theology of Jungmann and Hofinger.[30] The Bible, like other texts, has the character of the not-yet; it is not yet complete because it assumes the future conversation with its interpreters by its very writtenness.

Interpretation of the Bible involves the interplay of questions. The claim to truth of the text questions the interpreter; the interpreter responds with further questions about the meaning of the text. If this is the case, it is inaccurate to claim that the Bible is God's final, authoritative word. Such an understanding of the Bible assumes the Bible <u>tells</u> the interpreter what truth is, once for all. In this case, the authoritative word of God becomes the subject of the conversation. Instead of dialogue, the Bible presents an authoritative monologue.

Gadamer's hermeneutic does not depend on understanding the Bible as assertion. The Bible does not pre-empt the exchange of possibilities between itself and its interpreters by asserting an opinion that must be accepted; it opens itself to us in the form of questioning. If its questions are true questions instead of apparent ones, its answers have not yet been determined. Neither the biblical text nor the interpreter contains the truth or the answer to the question, because truth and the answer are disclosed in the situation of

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[30]See Mary Boys, <u>Biblical Interpretation in Religious Education</u> (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1980), especially 76-92, for a fine discussion of Jungmann and Hofinger.

interpretation, in the dialogue which we are. They only exist as they are given life in the interpretation and application in each act of interpretation.

Prejudices and the Naming of Horizons

One distinctive element of Gadamer's hermeneutics is his discussion of the active role prejudices play in understanding. Even though Gadamer does not emphasize the role of prejudice in biblical interpretation, there are clear implications for biblical hermeneutics if one accepts what he says about prejudice.

The Bible is a part of the tradition that helps form and nurture persons within the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Because of the historical place the Bible has served in the self-understanding of the community of faith, one born into that community will inherit a predisposition toward the text. For the larger Judaeo-Christian community, there are certain minimum assumptions about the Bible: it tells the history of the relationship between the God of Israel and the people of God, first identified as the nation of Israel and later re-interpreted as the Christian community; it has authoritative status as Scripture-- that is, it is considered sacred literature, related somehow to God's own self-revelation and inspiration;[31] and it is somehow related to the development

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[31]See Paul J. Achtemeier, The Inspiration of Scripture: Problems and Proposals (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980); and David H. Kelsey, The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) for a discussion of the issues that constitute the development of the term

of the community's values, standards, and norms. In addition, each subset of that larger community, whether denomination, conference, or congregation, develops its own typical ways of using and understanding the biblical material.

Each of these assumptions becomes a part of the prejudice one has toward the Bible before one even reads the text. Because the historicity of persons in the Western world is framed within a context in which the Bible is a part of the cultural assumptions of the community, one already expects the Bible to tell him or her something before reading the material presented there. Furthermore, one suspects she or he already knows what the Bible will say before it says it. This is the function of prejudice; we begin our encounter with the Bible with a pre-existing understanding of the message of the whole that gives us an early orientation toward the particular text under investigation. Gadamer believes that, without this prejudice toward the Bible, we would not be able to understand what the Bible says. Prejudice is the pre-condition for understanding.

One implication of Gadamer's discussion is that biblical hermeneutics become contextual hermeneutics. Prejudice forces the interpreter to recognize the influence of previous understanding of the text on the meaning the text has in the current situation. Each community of which the interpreter is a member transmits a world-view, including a basic orientation

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Scripture.

toward the Bible.

The Bible also has its prejudice. As Pardy suggests, the development of canon is a result of the "valuing process" of distinguishing between legitmate prejudices and illegitimate ones.[32] In addition, each text represents the pre-judged possibilities that are presented by the questions posed in the hermeneutical encounter with the interpreter. The prejudice of the Bible is its perspective, its claim to truth. The process of interpretation is at least partially characterized by the dialectic between the prejudice of the text and the prejudice of the interpreter.

Gadamer's point is that one cannot be open to possibility until one recognizes what one already knows about the subject at hand. The recognition of one's prejudices related to the Bible names the previous knowledge about the text one brings into the encounter. It identifies the starting point from which new understandings of the subject matter develop. We never learn ex nihilo; every development of knowledge is based on previous knowledge that has been challenged or reinforced by new questions in the form of the Bible's claim to truth.

The Fusion of Horizons and the Bible

Gadamer's discussion of prejudice is closely related to his hermeneutics is his understanding of the fusion of horizons. The Bible has its own horizon, its own basic perspective from which and by which it enters the world. This

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[32]Pardy, 77.

horizon is limited by the nature of the text itself. It can never say more than what is contained within the text itself. Yet, it can always say a new word to each interpreter who approaches the Bible openly, expecting the Bible to ask her or him questions about his or her own horizon. The horizon of the Bible is constructed from a particular understanding of the way God has acted in the past, a characteristic vision of the human community and its purpose, and a claim to truth about the future. These elements become a part of what Gadamer describes as a horizon, "the area circumscribed by a viewpoint."[33] When one interprets the Bible, it is the horizon of the Bible, not the words of the text itself, that is the focus of interpretation. One who interprets the Bible begins to understand the way the Bible views the world.

Each person who interprets also comes into the hermeneutical experience with a personal horizon. This horizon is made up of one's prejudices, one's present experience, one's vision of the community and of reality, one' sense of historicity. The borders of the horizon of a hermeneutically oriented person are open and malleable, not fixed and rigid. Each time one moves from the present standpoint, the horizon changes. Each new experience that challenges one's viewpoint requires the interpreter to open his or her horizon to change as well.

Understanding happens when the horizon of the interpreter

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[33]Stover, 35.

encounters the horizon of the Bible and the interplay of question-and-answer begins. Neither the horizon of the Bible nor the horizon of the interpreter is destroyed in the dialectical interaction of interpretation. Instead, each act of interpreting the Bible results in the creation of a new horizon. The experience of interpretation always results in movement beyond the horizon one brings with her or him. The purpose of interpretation is to recognize the strangeness of the horizon of the Bible and, as a result, to re-examine one's own horizon. The end result is that a new horizon is created as one seeks to incorporate the horizon of the Bible into one's own horizon.

Gadamer's biblical hermeneutic builds upon the foundation laid in his general hermeneutic. His understanding of the Bible as a dialogue partner instead of an authoritarian voice provides a helpful counterpoint to the stringent claims of fundamentalism. His insistence that biblical hermeneutics must recognize the Bible's claim to truth as a claim to be taken seriously offers a legitimate alternative to the empirical assumptions of historical critical approaches to biblical interpretation.

Gadamer's hermeneutic also has several implications for education in general and, especially, for Christian religious education. Chapter 3 addresses some of the insights he offers in those areas of study.

CHAPTER 3

Implications For Christian Religious Education

Gadamer's hermeneutic has several implications for the way one understands Christian religious education. Because his concerns are philosophical, he spends little time discussing educational issues.[1] Although his direct discussions of education are limited, Gadamer offers five major contributions to a model of hermeneutical religious education: epistemology, an experiential approach to education, a question and answer approach to religious education, a description of the nature of the religious community, and a contextual approach to religious education.

Gadamer's Epistemology

Gadamer's epistemology is based on his discussion of phronēsis and praxis.The way of knowing appropriate to hermeneutics is the kind of practical wisdom he calls phronēsis.

Gadamer compares his understanding of practical philosophy with the Kunstlehre, or teaching about a technical skill or know how, that he finds typical of Romanticism.[2] He

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[1]There are no entries for education in the Index to Truth and Method, and only one reference, on 249, directly addresses this subject.

[2]Gadamer, "Hermeneutics As Practical Philosophy," 88-100. He also discusses Schleiermacher's Glaubenslehre (teaching about the faith) and the category of Wissenschaftslehre (teaching about the natural sciences.)

is critical of the epistemology implicit in previous examples of education because they seem directed toward teaching <u>about</u> their subjects. The underlying assumption behind such pedagogies is that there is an objective body of knowledge that can be taught.

Gadamer discusses intimate knowledge <u>of</u> the subject matter, not <u>about</u> a pile of facts. He claims one knows the text or the partner in dialogue like one knows another subject. He is not interested in mastering techniques to obtain knowledge about the partner or knowing how to manipulate the other. Instead, Gadamer's epistemology is intersubjective and interpersonal. He looks at an intimate, dialogical way of knowing. This epistemology has several implications for Christian religious education.

<u>Intersubjective Study of the Bible</u>

A Christian religious education model influenced by Gadamer would begin with the assumption that, in order to work with the Bible, one's efforts are not directed solely toward knowing <u>about</u> the Bible. Instead, Christian religious education would focus on knowing the text of the Bible as a partner in dialogue. His approach may be described as intersubjective hermeneutics. The Bible is not an objective pile of facts; instead, the Bible is a partner in a conversation with the subject matter.

This means that Christian religious education must shift its focus away from the scientific, technical mastery of the

facts <u>about</u> the Bible that is typical of many forms of historical-critical hermeneutics. Christian religious edcuation must also oppose the domineering, authoritarian Word-of-God-as-assertion orientation of fundamentalism.[3] Both of these positions understand the Bible as a silent, objective relic one needs to know <u>about</u> and master through a set of interpretive principles. Historical-critical hermeneutics and fundamentalist hermeneutics work with very different interpretive principles. However, they both seem to assume that the Bible can be understood objectively.

Gadamer believes that biblical hermeneutics deals with the disclosure of the Word of God in the Bible. The intersubjective understanding of the Bible he proposes means that Christian religious education treats the Bible as a subject, not an object. The interpreter opens herself or himself to being questioned by another subject instead of controlling an interpretive analysis of an object. The major problem in most hermeneutics is that they expect the voice of the Bible to be revealed by the application of superior method or to be heard as assertive demand.

<u>Listening to the Bible</u>. The understanding of the Bible as a dialogue partner requires intentional and concentrated listening. Maria Harris describes Christian religious

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[3]The former position is represented by the Christian Life Curriculum, while the latter is represented by such curriculum series as David C. Cook's "Bible-in-Life," Scripture Press, and Gospel Light.

education as a dance with five steps: silence, awareness, mourning, bonding, and birthing. The first of these steps, silence, has two movements: listening and refusing to remain silent.[4] Listening is different from hearing. Hearing is biological and determinate. It depends on the proper functioning of the physical elements of sound production, reception, and evaluation. But listening requires the intention of understanding <u>what</u> is said, not just recognizing the signs <u>that</u> something has been said. Listening requires decision and commitment.

Intersubjective Christian religious education encourages persons to listen to the Bible, not just to hear the Bible. True listening assumes several things about the relationship between the Bible and its interpreters.

1. <u>Giving respect to the one speaking</u>. Listening to another means one must consider the other's opinion to be worthy of consideration. Basic respect for the other is a precondition for this kind of listening. The dialogue that is typical of Gadamer's hermeneutic is described by an I-Thou relationship between the partners. In order to listen to the Bible, one must respect it as a dialogue partner, a Thou, and not as a collection of data to be analyzed. Christian religious education that understands the Bible intersubjectively respects the Bible as a fellow subject and

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[4]Maria Harris, <u>Teaching and Religious Imagination</u> (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), especially Chapter 6.

considers what the Bible has to say about past, present, and future to be a viable possibility for the way one might live one's own life.

2. <u>Expecting something to be said</u>. The kind of dialogue Gadamer describes is possible only when both partners in the conversation expect the encounter between them to say something meaningful. When one truly listens to what the other says, she or he intends to hear the claim of truth in the message of the partner. He or she expects the other to say something that challenges hr or his prejudices. As Kathleen Wright suggests, a true I-Thou relationship expects something important to be said in the dialogue between partners.[5]

Persons within the religious community have a previous relationship with the Bible that affects one who is aware of her or his historicality. As Gadamer indicates, this previous understanding of the Bible, the way the community celebrates, reads, and lives the Bible, gives the member of the community a predisposition toward the Bible before he or she ever reads a page of the text. He calls this predisposition prejudice. The interpreter of the Bible already expects it to say something before interpreting the text. If the truth be known, most interpreters of the Bible already think they know what it will say before reading the words contained there.

This implies that Christian religious education needs to help the persons who read and interpret the Bible to approach

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[5]Wright, 202.

the text with a sense of openness. One must enter the hermeneutical event expectantly. Many historical-critical methods are geared toward creating the message in a text through the application of sound methodology; the interpreter, not the text or its message, is the active agent in the event. Gadamer's hermeneutic claims the text interacts with the experience of the interpreter. This interaction allows meaning to emerge. He presents an encounter-oriented understanding of interpretation. Casual observation of congregational life would suggest that few persons expect a revelatory event as they participate in worship, traditional religious educational events, committee meetings, etc. One task facing the Christian religious educator might be to help the congregation and its members develop a sense of expectancy as they engage in dialogue with the Bible.

3. Openness to change. In order to truly listen, one must also open oneself to the possibility of change. Both subjects in a hermeneutical encounter are changed as meaning emerges out of the interaction. Neither partner is destroyed in the encounter, but neither will be able to look at the world in exactly the same way either.

Gadamer's hermeneutic suggests a hermeneutical spiral in place of the traditional hermeneutical circle.[6] The circle

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[6]Weinsheimer, 40, suggests the image of the spiral. See also Mary Poplin's descriptions of the spiral in what she calls holistic/constructivist education in "Holistic/Constructivist Principles of the Teaching/Learning Process: Implications for the Field of Learning Disabilities",

remains two-dimensional and assumes a self-contained organism in which the various elements at play within its boundaries remain within the limits of the circle itself. Neither the text nor the interpreter necessarily changes as a result of the conversation. The circle is, in short, reductionistic. But true listening requires risking oneself to the possibility that what the other says might require one to change. The partners in dialogue cannot remain static and unchanged. Neither party ends the conversation where he or she began it; something new has been added to each life-world, and all future conversations must begin from this new, increased viewpoint. The downward direction of the spiral indicates Gadamer's belief that the purpose of dialogue with the subject matter is to focus upon the essential claim to truth in the dialogue with increasing intensity. Dialogue with a text moves one toward meaning with increasing clarity and sharper focus.

Every act of dialogue with a text results in a new starting place for every future dialogue. Christian religious education that takes this insight seriously will help persons open themselves to the possibility that they will be changed dramatically as a result of the hermeneutical encounter. Thus, the activity of Christian religious education must include encouraging an environment in which persons are nurtured to

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Journal of Learning Disabilities 21, no. 7 (August/September, 1988): 401-16. See my illustrations comparing Gadamer's hermeneutical spiral to a variety of hermeneutical circles on 46-47.

accept change.

One insight from Maria Harris' understanding of religious education as a dance is her recognition that one step in the dance is that of mourning.[7] A crucial task of religious education is developing the ability to let go, to be able to name the loss of approaches to education, or previous understandings, that no longer make sense in light of the new understanding that has emerged in the hermeneutical encounter. Change does not occur without loss, and growth is not accomplished without the death of some things we have previously held as precious. Christian religious education must help persons recognize that change and growth are likely to result in grief and despair as well as joy and celebration. Harris' inclusion of the step of mourning seems to be a necessary corrective to many simplistic approaches to Christian religious education while offering a challenging acknowledgment that learning always involves struggle as well as celebration.

4. Directed toward the subject matter. The intersubjective nature of Gadamer's approach is directed toward the act of understanding itself.[8] This understanding is described as the fusion of horizons between the horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreter. The subject matter, not the subjective intention of either partner,

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[7]Harris, 108-10.

[8]Palmer, 215.

directs the hermeneutical event. This insight has several implications for the use of the Bible in Christian religious education, but two deserve particular mention.

Meaning emerges through encounter with the subject matter presented by the text. Christian religious education that takes Gadamer seriously focuses on the subject matter that empowers the text to question one's experience. It does not identify what the author intended to say. As Pardy suggests, one way of beginning to identify the subject matter at hand is by asking what previous question the text appears to answer.[9]

The questioning that concerns Gadamer is not random or subjective.[10] The direction of the subject matter itself limits the kinds of questions one may ask of the text. The subject matter, not the intentions of the interpreter or the text's author, directs the content and direction of the dialogue that characterizes hermeneutics. The subject matter constitutes the common basis on which the conversation proceeds. The subject matter poses the initial question that begins the conversation. And the subject matter offers the possibilities that challenge the horizon of the interpreter and of the text.

Because we are historical beings our questions are also

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[9]Pardy, 131.

[10]See Bernstein's defense of Gadamer against frequent charges of subjectivism in Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, especially 118-31.

limited by the history of interpretation, the tradition, in which the interpreter and the text are both swept up. Both the text and the interpreter are part of the happening of tradition.

This means that Christian religious education that is consciously intersubjective needs to approach the Bible in a way that identifies the prejudices brought to the encounter with the text. An intersubjective educational model would include a step in which the interpreter, or the community of interpretation, would name the previous understanding of the text at hand. Only by identifying what one already knows about the Bible as a whole, or the individual text in question, can one begin to listen to what the subject matter has to say instead of being blocked by what one <u>expects</u> it to say. This is particularly important, in the Christian community, when one studies the gospels. As Fred Craddock points out, the gospel story has been told and re-told in the United States so often that most persons have a vague, composite idea of what is contained there whether they have ever read the gospels or not. In order to truly hear the gospels it may be necessary to <u>overhear</u> them first, as though they were directed toward someone else.[11]

Meaning emerges under the direction of the subject matter, not under the direction of either subject. One of the

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[11]Fred Craddock, <u>Overhearing the Gospel: Preaching and Teaching the Faith to Persons Who Have Already Heard It</u> (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978)

more radical claims in Gadamer's discussion of the Bible is that the Bible is no more authoritative than the interpreter in the dialogue which is understanding. Neither partner in a dialogue brings the final solution to the questioning Gadamer claims is characteristic of hermeneutics. Instead, Gadamer insists that meaning emerges out of the conversation <u>between</u> the partners; conversation does not center on the nature of the subjects, but on the nature of the subject matter the two share as the point of the conversation. The subject matter of the Bible, not the specific words in which the subject matter is couched and not the subjective intentions of the interpreter, controls the conversation.

Meaning happens <u>between</u> the two subjects; this is why his hermeneutic is referred to as intersubjective. Neither partner dominates the other in true dialogue. Instead, both subjects focus on the progressive unfolding of meaning as they address the ontological presence of Being in the subject matter. The self-understanding of the subjects is temporarily suspended as both work at understanding the subject matter that has drawn them each into the dialogue.

A truly intersubjective approach to biblical hermeneutics must recognize that the text of the Bible itself is not the Word of God. Instead, the Word of God is encountered as the biblical text and its interpreters listen, question, answer, and struggle to be grasped by the meaning of the subject matter behind the text. The subject matter not only makes a

claim to truth, it makes the Word of God present in the dialogue with the interpreter.[12] Gadamer's distinction between the subject matter of the Bible and the subject represented by the text itself should serve as a corrective to overzealous biblicists who claim the inerrant words that comprise the Bible are <u>themselves</u> the authoritative Word of God.

<div align="center">Education By Experience</div>

Gadamer only discusses education directly on a few occasions. In <u>Truth and Method</u>, education arises in the context of the question of experience. There, Gadamer rejects an induction theory of learning and proposes an experiential understanding of education in its place.[13]

Rejection of Induction

Induction begins when one recognizes repetition, when one has the same experience twice. One gradually recognizes that similar circumstances produce similar results and, eventually, begins to generalize about the experience in the initial formation of a concept. The formation of a concept about a phenomenon is the goal of inductive learning models.

Gadamer claims one's experience is not limited to one's conceptualization of it. Weinsheimer contends Gadamer, "conceives of knowledge in terms of experience and process rather than conceiving of experience in terms of knowledge and

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[12]Gadamer, <u>Truth and Method</u>, 295.

[13]See Weinsheimer's discussion, 202-6.

result."[14] Gadamer says that experience is more characterized by disconfirmation than by confirmation; change is more typical of experience than regularity. This claim runs counter to induction theories of knowledge and learning, which emphasize confirmation.[15] Weinsheimer says:

> Inductive confirmation, we have said, presupposes two experiences of the same object. Disconfirmation, it would seem, implies acquiring a new concept. The former concept that governed our old expectation is negated and a new one is formed.... What Gadamer affirms..., is that experience is essentially the experience of negation.... In this respect, conceptual knowledge is not the end and goal of experience, but its antithesis.[16]

The end or goal of experience is experience itself. Thus, Gadamer claims, "The dialectic of experience has its own fulfillment not in definitive knowledge, but in that openness to experience that is encouraged by experience itself."[17] He does not believe induction takes the human reality of disconfirmation, disequilibrium, and disappointment seriously.

Hermeneutical Experience

Gadamer claims that hermeneutical experience differs from the inductive learning theories that have influenced educational philosophy. Experience is frequently the negation of one's expectations. He says, "Every experience worthy of

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[14]Weinsheimer, 202.

[15]See Mary Elizabeth Moore's discussion of continuity and change, in Education for Continuity and Change, especially 22 and 103-5.

[16]Weinsheimer, 204.

[17]Gadamer, Truth and Method, 319.

the name runs counter to our expectation. Thus the historical nature of man contains as an essential element a fundamental negativity that emerges in the relation between experience and insight."[18] Gadamer believes experience leads away from a formal inductive epistemology: "Thus Gadamer suggests that the end of experience consists not in knowledge but in experience itself: in being experienced--that is, being open to new experience."[19]

Gadamer believes that hermeneutical experience is concerned with what is transmitted through tradition.[20] Indeed, in one of his few direct references to education, Gadamer states:

> That which has been sanctioned by tradition and custom has an authority that is nameless, and our finite historical being is marked by the fact that always the authority of what has been transmitted--and not only what is clearly grounded--has power over our attitudes and behaviour. All education depends on this, and even though, in the case of education, the educator loses his function when his charge comes of age and sets his own insight and decisions in the place of the authority of the educator, this movement into maturity in his own life does not mean that a person becomes his own master in the sense that he becomes free of all tradition.[21]

The importance of tradition for education suggests numerous

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[18]Ibid.

[19]Weinsheimer, 204.

[20]Gadamer, Truth and Method, 321.

[21]Ibid., 249. Habermas, in "A Review of Gadamer's Truth and Method", 269, takes exception to this position, and claims Gadamer is a naive traditionalist who sees the educator as one who "legitimates prejudices" through her or his authority as one who grants privileges or threatens sanctions.

implications for Christian religious education:

Christian religious education as discontinuity. Human experience, including the experience of faith, is not primarily an experience of regularity, confirmation, and continuity. More life experience is characterized by the strange disconfirming event than by the repeated, generalizable experience. The strangeness of the text's claim to truth makes the interpreter aware of the inadequacy of her or his prejudices. Biblical hermeneutics begins when one recognizes the claims of the Bible as discontinuous with his or her own experience of reality.

Piaget claims growth from one stage of development to another is triggered by disequilibrium. The uneasiness of a world-view that no longer fits the experience of the interpreter causes one to re-think one's assumptions and one's world-view. Christian religious education needs to help persons recognize the moments of disequilibrium as opportunities for growth. The strangeness of the biblical horizon does not have to cause one to reject that horizon. Gadamer claims it can help one recognize the inadequacy of one's own prejudices toward the world.

Christian religious education is grounded in the tradition of the religious community and informed by its Scriptures. Many have claimed Gadamer is subjectivistic or relativistic because of his refusal to develop methods of interpretation; his rejection of absolute and correspondence

theories of truth has led to similar charges. However, he grounds his understanding of hermeneutics in tradition. This move provides limits to the possible relativism of his hermeneutic.[22] No one is free to interpret a text in a way that is inconsistent with the direction of meaning offered by the text itself. No one may interpret a text in a way that does not consider the way the tradition has interpreted the text before one's hermeneutical encounter with it. The interpreter and the text are part of the ongoing development of tradition. Each is affected by the emergence of truth in the hermeneutical event.

Nevertheless, his use of tradition seems to open the way for a veneration of the status quo. As Habermas and others maintain, Gadamer seems to downplay the coercive power of tradition and authority.[23] His brief discussion of educational issues sounds similar to a transmission theory of Christian religious education.[24] It is possible to read Gadamer's proposals as claiming Christian religious education hands on the tradition as though it were a textbook to be learned. This would be a misreading of his hermeneutic; indeed, he is critical of historicism for just such a reason. He understands

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[22]Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, 165-69, defends Gadamer from charges of relativism on the basis of the centrality of tradition and the direction of the text.

[23]See the debate between Habermas and Gadamer discussed previously in this dissertation.

[24]See Boys, especially Chapter 4, for a discussion of transmissive education.

interpretation dialectically. Tradition is not an authoritarian agent that coerces the interpreter; instead, tradition is a partner in dialogue <u>with</u> the interpreter.

The Bible is one part of the religious tradition that helps define the identity of Christian and Jew. Christian religious education needs to work with persons within given faith communities in such a way that all are caught up in the flow of tradition. Each person within the religious community has his or her own horizon; so do the Bible, church history, theology, ethics, and so forth. Each of these affects the present experience of the interpreter by making its own strange claim to truth.

The dialogue between the tradition and those who interpret it is not limited to the present moment. They are swept together toward an emerging future. Gadamer emphasizes that there is a not-yet quality that constitutes the hermeneutical event. He is not interested in a static understanding of the past, nor is he satisfied with an exclusive focus on the present experience of the interpreter. The purpose of hermeneutics is always that something new happens in the dialogue between the text and interpreter. The direction of interpretation is toward what is yet to happen, not toward what doctrine claims is the truth proclaimed by the Bible, the teaching office of the church, or orthodox theology.

The Centrality of Questioning

Gadamer gives attention to the Socratic method of question and answer. This is important for the discussion of Christian religious education and the experience of discontinuity.

Gadamer prefers the Socratic dialectic to Hegel's approach because Socrates seems more aware of the "knowledge of not knowing."[25] Gadamer claims Hegel's dialectic proceeds with assertions, whereas Socrates' dialectic moves in the form of questions. A dialectic based on assertion assumes that one always knows and is prepared to state the truth. As Weinsheimer says, the dialectic of assertion closes off the past by forgetting the original questions that created the texts at hand. It also closes off the future by ending any possibility that further answers might have a legitimate claim to truth.[26]

Gadamer contends that dialectic focuses on the _process_ of understanding, not on its sources or its results.[27] The kind of questioning Gadamer proposes has at least two elements: openness and limitation.

The Openness of Questioning

The person who questions is inherently open to the

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[25]Weinsheimer, 205-6.

[26]Ibid.

[27]Ibid. Weinsheimer states, "Thus to explicate the openness of experience [Gadamer] affirms the primacy of process over state and of question over statement."

possible answers that might emerge out of the dialogue. The person who questions knows he or she is lacking in knowledge and opens herself or himself to the kind of information the partner might offer. A dialectic based on assertion claims the subject knows evrything about the subject matter and actively asserts that information in its domination of the dialectic.

Socrates begins with questions; he recognizes the incompleteness of knowledge. For Socrates, knowledge is not transmitted from one person to another by the assertion of truth; knowledge is obtained as partners explore the meaning of the subject matter together. His dialogues with his students are more typified by mutual exploration of ideas than by the authoritatve assertion of truth by a learned master.

Christian religious education that takes this insight seriously would promote an environment within which persons approach the questioning subject with openness to the possibility that what the partner has to say may be important and meaningful. Being open to the Bible as a dialogue partner means risking one's prejudices concerning what the Bible says. It means making oneself vulnerable to the challenging, often strange horizon of the Bible. It also means trusting and respecting the claims to truth made by the Bible. Being open to the questions brought by the Bible does not mean accepting the biblical horizon as a dogmatic assertion; it means hearing the Word of the Bible as a possibility for one's own synthesis of reality. Only by being open to the message contained within

the Bible can the Bible become a partner in a dialogue. If one is not open, the Bible becomes either an absolute assertion or a meaningless curiosity that contains no truth and is studied for its academic interest alone.[28]

The Limits of Questioning

Each question carries within itself a kind of self limitation. Even though Gadamer does not present a method of interpretation, his hermeneutic is not a normless, freestyle, anything-goes interpretation. He bases his hermeneutic on questioning instead of assertion. This allows Gadamer to identify two kinds of limitation to the questions one may ask in the act of interpretation.

The direction presented by the text. The range of possible questions one may ask of a text is limited by the direction of questioning found in the text. Because the text has no current voice and cannot engage in the same kind of reciprocal conversation as that between two persons, the only conversation possible with a text is between the interpreter and her or his previous understanding of the text. But the questioning that characterizes his hermeneutic does not move in a purely subjective and eccentric way. Questioning always moves in the direction of the subject matter the partners are discussing. The subject matter presents the issues discussed

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[28]Ibid., 205-6. Here he claims the Bible as assertion ends any further conversation with the text because such an attitude assumes the Bible gives the final answer to the question of truth.

in the dialogue. The partners in the dialogue are both focused on those issues, not on their own absolute claims to truth.

Gadamer claims questions are essentially open. Questions assume the answers have not been pre-determined or given in advance. But questions are not without limits; every question presents its own claim to truth in terms of possible answers to the question. This is especially true with a text, which is itself the answer to a previous question.

Centrality of the subject matter. Neither the text nor its interpreter is finally in charge of the act of interpretation. Gadamer claims the subject matter is the focus of interpretation. For Gadamer, every act of interpretation needs to involve the to-and-fro dialectic between partners as they meet in the common event of the subject matter presented by the text.

This implies that Christian religious education needs to center on the subject matter of the Bible as a whole, as well as the particular passage being studied, and not solely on the agenda brought into the hermeneutical event by the interpreter. Intersubjectivity is based on the assumption that the text and the interpreter both deal with the subject matter presented by the text. Both partners concentrate on making sense of the subject matter they hold in common. Every true interpretation of the Bible must take seriously the encounter with the Word of God that might emerge in interpretation. For Gadamer, biblical interpretation provides the opportunity to

encounter the Word of God, which he claims _is_ the subject matter of the Bible.

The Nature of the Hermeneutical Community

Gadamer's discussion of phronēsis as the way of knowing appropriate to praxis raises a number of important issues about the kind of community necessary for intersubjective hermeneutic to be practiced. This has profound implications for Christian religious education. What types of religious communities would be most likely to provide the setting within which Gadamer's practical philosophy could take shape? There are at least four major elements that must exist for such a community to exist: rational decision-making based on ethical know-how; shared community values; an intentional recognition of a plurality of horizons and prejudices; and a situational application of norms.

Rational Decision-Making

Bernstein consistently quotes Gadamer's call for ethical decision-making on the basis of "the sense of what is feasible, what is possible, what is correct, here and now."[29] A rational process of making decisions is at the heart of feasibility, possibility, correctness, and immediacy. Despite his criticism of the way the concept of praxis was "deformed" in the Romantic period, Gadamer discusses the concept of

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[29]Bernstein, "From Hermeneutics to Praxis," 286- 287.

praxis.[30] Gadamer considers knowledge to be almost exclusively a rational and cognitive act instead of an affective, volitional, conative, or even kinesthetic act. He limits his discussion of knowledge to the classical educational domains of cognitive learning.[31]

Gadamer's discussion remains rational for a variety of reasons. Perhaps foremost among those is the fact that Aristotle discussed phronēsis, technē, and epistemē as alternative forms of reason, not alternative ways of being in the world. The categories Gadamer offers for life under the influence of phronēsis--feasibility, possibility, correctness, and immediacy--are determined by the rational evaluation of what is appropriate to the situational application of values and norms of the community.

Shared Values

The religious community in which phronēsis could operate would need to make its members aware of the values, norms, and beliefs that are shared within the community. C. Ellis Nelson's influential book, Where Faith Begins, describes the centrality of shared values in the development of culture, and

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[30]Gadamer, "Hermeneutics and Social Science," Cultural Hermeneutics 2 (1975): 312.

[31]See Benjamin Bloom's classic discussions of educational domains in Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook I: Cognitive Domain (New York: David McKay, 1956) and its successors in 1964 and 1972. Also helpful is Sara Little's discussion of the implications of Bloom's taxonomy in religious education in To Set One's Heart: Belief and Teaching in the Church (Atlanta: John Knox Press), 1983, especially 25-31.

further claims that Christian religious education may be characterized by the process of enculturation or socialization.[32] Nelson describes socialization as the communication of culture "through a process of socialization which 1) establishes a perceptive system in relation to a world-view, 2) forms a conscience according to a value system, and 3) creates a self-definition out of personal relations within a social group."[33] Nelson's discussion is based on a long tradition of Christian religious education that centers the focus of the field on the Christian faith community.[34]

Bernstein, Habermas, and others suggest that one problem with Gadamer's understanding of phronēsis is his unwillingness to discuss what happens within communities in which the ideal polis has been corrupted and the free exchange, the play of dialogue so central to his hermeneutics is limited by coercion.[35] There is a strange silence in Gadamer's writing when one searches for ways to maintain his ideal community in the face of the overwhelming sense of valuelessness and normlessness in present-day society. He seems to imply that

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[32]C. Ellis Nelson, Where Faith Begins (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1976), especially 35-66.

[33]Ibid., 95.

[34]Groome, 119.

[35]Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, 158. The article cited in Bernstein's discussion of the corrupt polis, "Plato's Educational State" in Gadamer's Dialogue and Dialectic, 73-92, addresses the way the concept of justice functions in the ideal state.

phronēsis is capable of operating in any community.

Gadamer is reluctant to present any absolute norms that always apply as an objective set of criteria for moral decision making. Indeed, he claims that every dialogical encounter with another becomes the occasion for the emergence of truth for that occasion. Gadamer appeals to a limited number of values and norms that operate within the community of which the interpreter and the text are both members. These values become a part of the claim to truth made by the tradition and by the text and, therefore, become a part of the ongoing dialogue that will, inevitably, lead to the emergence of something new.

The crucial point is Gadamer's claim that every text and every individual comes to the hermeneutical encounter as a part of a shared community experience of reality. The identity of each person raised in a given community is influenced by the shared values, shared stories, shared myths, and shared texts by which the community defines its view of the world. Gadamer does not attempt to claim that every person within a given society or community reacts to the shared values in the same way. Because we are radically historical persons, we bring with us the influences of our communities to every act of interpretation.

Although Gadamer does not offer a list of what these shared values might be, Bernstein suggests several values: a common bond between persons, a sense of mutuality and respect,

genuine listening to what the other is saying, and openness to risking one's own assumptions and prejudices and test one's opinions through encounter with the other.[36]

One implication for Christian religious education is that each congregation is a separate community, each of which has its own set of shared values and shared horizons. These separate communities operate within identifiable constellations of other communities of similar beliefs, shared histories and traditions, and other historical connections. One constellation would be the larger identification of Christian, Jewish, even to a certain extent Islamic faith communities.[37] Within each of these constellations, each denomination or sect carries its own identity-forming prejudices and horizons. But each congregation provides the occasion for the transmission of the shared values of the larger Judaeo-Christian community in a setting that is most like the nature of the communities Gadamer envisions.

Plurality of Horizons and Prejudices

Persons within religious communities that are influenced by Gadamer's hermeneutic will recognize their own horizons and

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[36]Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, 161-62. Gadamer recognizes these values would be unrealistic for an entire society, and is skeptical of the attempt to engineer such communities. However, it may be possible to develop congregations as communities where these values are nurtured.

[37]These three faith communities are similar in their self-understanding as religions of the Book (the Bible, the Hebrew Bible, and the Koran operate with similar authority within these traditions) and in their claims of monotheism.

prejudices while accepting the multiple horizons and prejudices within the community. Understanding a text or another partner in dialogue requires one to understand oneself as well. The act of understanding involves the recognition of one's own perspective of the world, the way one has typically made sense of experience, the limits of the horizon within which one lives and moves.

Understanding also requires one to recognize that every other person in the community, every text that is held to be significant, every meaningful conversation, constitutes a separate horizon that must also be given the kind of respect, trust, and intentional listening that one learns to give to herself or himself.[38] The congregation is one community in which the mutual recognition of plural horizons is possible. Each of these horizons is potentially an occasion for the revelation of the Word of God.

Prejudices are also potentially helpful facts of life in community. Gadamer's claim that prejudices are unavoidable seems well taken. One task of the congregation would be to nurture a community within which persons are enabled to identify the prejudices that, both positively and negatively, affect the ways each person approaches the Bible, the tradition, and the other persons within the community.

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[38]David Tracy, _Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope_ (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), as well as in his earlier work, argues that philosophy and theology need to keep both pluralism and ambiguity central categories of discussion.

Interpretation as Application

Gadamer discusses the interrelationship between understanding, interpretation, and application. This interrelationship points to the centrality of the process of interpretation instead of the absolute knowledge to be gained by proper method. Gadamer sees these three terms as three moments in the process of interpretation, not as three separate steps in a scientific method of interpretation. This is especially important for the way the religious community uses and understands the Bible.

The Bible, in and of itself, is not the Word of God. It is the occasion by which the interpreter might be led to encounter the Word of God in the dialectic of interpretation. Knowledge of the Bible is not knowledge about the Bible, or even knowing Jesus through the Bible; it is being known by God within the encounter with the Bible. It is not sufficient to know what the Bible says. It is also necessary to know what the Bible claims about the situation, here and now, in which the Bible plays a role in one's understanding.

One of the tasks of a community of Christian religious education is building an attitude of openness to what the Bible, the tradition, and the experience of the community have to say about the way the world operates. In this openness, the nature of the God who interrelates with the community as a partner in the long-term dialogue which we are can be experienced. Interpretation is not interpretation once for

all. Gadamer's hermeneutic demands a less dogmatic view of interpretation. The point of interpretation of the Bible is the application of the general values encountered there to the current situation of the community within which interpretation is both sanctioned and carried out.

Christian religious education needs to help its participants recognize that the community itself must encourage a kind of playful interaction with the text of the Bible. Gadamer suggests meaning emerges when the partners are caught up in the play of interpretation. The community provides the place where one may encounter truth, as well as the context within which that truth may be applied in the lives of its members.

Christian Religious Education Is Contextual and Reciprocal

Gadamer's hermeneutics imply a Christian religious education that is contextual in its orientation and reciprocal in its methodology. He rejects an understanding of tradition that tells the individual the content of the faith and transmits that information as a pile of facts. Instead, he claims we stand within tradition together as members of religious communities. Tradition becomes a part of who we are, as well as what we know.

Contextual

The way of knowing Gadamer describes is best suited to the context of the congregation. Each congregational context is unique. Only an educational approach that takes the context

seriously and addresses the values, concerns, and needs of that community can adequately deal with the unique nature of the community itself.

Consequently, Christian religious education would focus on the context within which the specific community of faith lives out its ongoing response to the leading of God. Each congregation needs to identify what is going on in the lives of its people. At the same time, the congregation needs to help the congregation reach out beyond itself to meet the needs of the larger community within which it is set. Christian religious education centers on the context of the community that lives out of its dialogue with the texts of the faith, the tradition of the church, the experience of its people, and the reason that allows the interpretation of scripture, tradition, and experience.[39]

Reciprocal

The hermeneutical model Gadamer presents is reciprocal in nature. Neither the text nor the interpreter dominates in the process of interpretation. Instead, both are co-determined in the unfolding development of meaning in the dialogue between them. In order for this to happen, each has to be willing to give up his or her exclusive claim to the truth. Each has to risk being caught in a lie, or at least in error. And each has to be willing to become something new as new

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[39]The author is deeply indebted to Wesley's quadrilateral sources of authority in this issue.

meaning emerges from the dialectic.

Few examples of reciprocity between the Bible and the interpreter can be found in traditional models of Christian religious education. One or the other of the partners is generally given the dominant position in the relationship. But Gadamer's hermeneutics imply a Christian religious education in which both the text and its interpreter are affected by the act of interpretation. There is a mutual sense of openness, of listening, and of risk in the shared commitment to the emergence of meaning in the encounter.

Christian religious education is reciprocal because it represents a mutual exchange of values, of stories, of texts, of experiences, and of a way of constructing reality. Reciprocity implies equity. But it also implies a mutual willingness to give the other person her or his due, to give up one's own exclusive claim to absolute truth. The kind of Christian religious education implied by Gadamer's hermeneutic is based on the assumption that neither the Bible nor its interpreters has a corner on truth. Only as they both allow for the interplay of question-and-answer, open themselves to a different way of knowing than that found in the scientific community, educate on the basis of experience, develop a hermeneutical community, and recognize the contextual and reciprocal nature of that community can the Bible and its interpreters become the occasion within which the Word of God may speak clearly to those with ears to hear.

PART II

THOMAS GROOME'S SHARED CHRISTIAN <u>PRAXIS</u>

MODEL OF CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

PART II

**Thomas Groome's Shared Christian <u>Praxis</u>
Model Of Christian Religious Education**

The appearance of Thomas Groome's important book, <u>Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision</u>, in 1980 marked the beginning of a new kind of discussion in the field of religious education. In addition to presenting a clear and thorough study of the history and foundations of Christian religious education through time, Groome lays out a philosophical basis for the field that sets the agenda for virtually every shcolar in the field to follow. The dust jacket to the book contains several accolades for his work, but none as significant as James Fowler's claim that <u>Christian Religious Education</u> is "likely to be the most significant single book in the field of Christian education for the next twenty years."[1]

Groome's shared Christian <u>praxis</u> model has been the source of debate as well as the topic of positive conversation in a variety of circles since the release of the book. His approach has been discussed in the Association of Professors and Researchers in Religious Education, interdenominational gatherings of local church educators, catechism classes, and

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[1]Groome, <u>Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision</u>; see comments on dust jacket (both front cover and inside front).

university planning retreats.[2]

The book offers summary statements of the major issues in the history of Christian religious education: the biblical basis for religious education, the nature of Christian faith, the social basis of Christian religious education (including a summary of the socialization/enculturation approaches to the field), etc. This contribution alone has made <u>Christian Religious Education</u> a significant event in the field.

Groome presents a number of significant issues in his shared Christian <u>praxis</u> approach. His discussion of Christian religious education as a historical discipline has helped the field re-focus its understanding of such issues as tradition, doctrine, and the Bible. Perhaps his most significant contribution has been his discussion of the philosophical basis of Christian religious education.[3] Groome focuses particularly on the issue of epistemology, the way of knowing. His epistemology is grounded in the philosophical tradition that runs from Aristotle, through Hegel and Marx, up to the more contemporary philosophies of Habermas and Freire. All of these hold one thing in common: epistemology centers on <u>praxis</u>.

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[2]Ibid.; see his examples of shared Christian praxis in operation in Chapter 10, "Shared Praxis in Praxis," 207-32. A helpful review of the book is provided by Charles R. Foster in "Three Big Books in Christian Education," <u>Quarterly Review</u> 2 (Fall 1982): 98-107.

[3]Part 4 of <u>Christian Religious Education</u>, 135-232, is dominated by his discussion of various philosophical issues in Christian religious education.

Part II is organized into three chapters. Chapter 4 examines Groome's understanding of the historicity of Christian religious education. He focuses on three dimensions of history: the past is the "already"; the present is in the process of being realized; and the future is the "not yet."[4] This discussion has implications for the way he develops his shared Christian praxis model. Chapter 5 examines Groome's epistemology, especially what he calls a biblical way of knowing and a praxis way of knowing. Chapter 6 presents Groome's own model of shared Christian praxis. The chapter will include an evaluation of the importance of Groome's approach for developing a model of Christian religious education that takes intersubjectivity and praxis seriously.

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[4]Ibid., 5-6.

CHAPTER 4

Groome's Understanding Of Time And History

Groome understands Christian religious education historically:

> The nature, purpose, and context of Christian religious education calls for a way of knowing that can hold past, present, and future in a fruitful tension, that fosters free and freeing lived Christian faith, that promotes a creative relationship with a Christian community and of that community to the world.[1]

Christian religious education is, therefore, not an enterprise that is situated primarily in any of the three traditional expressions of time. This form of education operates in a dialectical relationship between the effects of the past, the experience of the present, and the calling of the future. Groome sees the three moments of time as mutually informative and effective. He suggests that past, present, and future should be held in a fruitful tension.

The Past

Groome refers to the past as the "already", and claims: "The 'already' dimension is expressive of either what the learner already knows or what the educator knows and the learner has the inner capacity to consciously appropriate."[2] The past is comprised of the reflections upon experience made by persons who have lived before us. Groome appeals to Dewey's term for this historical record of experiences as the "funded

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[1]Groome, _Christian Religious Education_, 149.

[2]Ibid., 5.

capital" of the Christian community.[3] The past is that set of powerful images and evocative experiences that go into the individual's own experience of faith.

One is always affected by history; it is an inevitable factor in both the present and the future toward which one is called. The past has significant impact within the Christian community. The name he gives to his discussion of the past, or the already, is the Christian Story.

Groome makes it clear his use of Christian Story is not simple storytelling, nor is he referring to what he calls "simple narrative." Instead, he says: "By Christian Story I mean the whole faith tradition of our people however that is expressed or embodied."[4] The Story is the entire history of the Christian community as it has experienced the leading of God, reflected on the significance of that set of experiences, and considered the Story important enough to pass on from generation to generation. According to Groome, Scripture, ritual, the history of interpretation of the Bible, the development of doctrine and dogma, feast days, etc., are the embodiment, expression, and re-creation of the experiences that gave rise to the Story.[5] He has described the Story elsewhere in the following way: "The [S]tory here refers to the memory of how God has revealed himself in the past of our

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[3]Ibid., 7.

[4]Ibid., 192.

[5]Ibid.

people and how our people understood and responded to that revelation."[6]

Indeed, memory is an important way to describe Groome's understanding of the ways the past affects persons living in the Christian community. Groome's understanding of memory and the act of remembering is suggested in the following:

> Remembering is not only looking backward to the personal and social biographies of individual and community. It also requires looking outward, a re-membering of our present action with the source of that action in its present social context. It is becoming aware of the world of which we are members and how that membership shapes our present action.[7]

Memory, especially the critical memory Groome addresses, brings the influence of the past to one's present awareness. Groome's understanding of time treats the past in a way that is reminiscent of Gadamer's discussion of the effects of history. His discussion of critical memory seems similar to Gadamer's understanding of the consciousness of the effects of history. Critical memory is "reflection upon one's reflection."[8] It begins with the awareness that all that has gone on in the past, especially within a historical and tradition-rich community like the Church, shapes the way one makes sense of and lives within the present. It becomes critical memory when one consciously reflects on the effects

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[6]Groome, "The Critical Principle in Christian Education and the Task of Prophecy," Religious Education 72 no. 3 (May-June 1977): 268.

[7]Groome, Christian Religious Education, 186.

[8]Ibid.

of the past on present experience.

The Christian Story operates in a dialectical relationship with present experience. Groome does not consider the past to be an objective set of authoritative and absolute facts that dominate the present. Instead, he believes shared Christian _praxis_ can be described as "a group of Christians sharing in dialogue their critical reflection on present action in light of the Christian Story and its Vision toward the end of lived Christian faith."[9] The past functions as a hermeneutical principle that assists the individual as she or he interprets present experience.

Groome emphasizes the crucial function of the past in Christian religious education. The Bible, the Christian tradition, the historical statements of faith, etc., give persons in the church a sense of participation in the Reign of God. Indeed, Groome's major criticism of Paulo Freire's work is Freire's lack of attention to the past:

> I...criticize [Freire] for placing undue emphasis on the present and future, to the almost total neglect of the past. He sounds, at times, as Habermas does, as if nothing from the past is to be made available again to people in the present. I attempt to correct this in the shared praxis approach by insisting that the Story of the faith community be constantly remembered.[10]

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[9]Ibid., 184.

[10]Ibid., 176.

The Present

The present is not simply the particular events that happen at any given moment. Groome claims:

> Present action here means much more than the overt productive activity of the present moment. It means our whole human engagement in the world, our every doing that has any intentionality or deliberateness to it. Present action is whatever way we give expression to ourselves.[11]

The present is affected by the past, and is especially affected by the shared past of the faith community. Groome believes the present is the only time that actually exists for the person. But the present is not a self-contained and self-sufficient entity. The present is also inhabited by what Groome calls "the heritage of the past and the possibility of the future."[12]

All experience is present experience. The memory of the past affects what one may know about the present, but all human knowing takes place in the present. Groome claims:

[K]nowledge as a human possibility must be appropriated by a present process. Even when educators emphasize the heritage of knowledge already known as the starting point for educational activity, the wiser ones recognize that to truly apprporiate such knowledge as their own, students must enter into a present active encounter with that heritage. Without such a present active process (in one sense a rediscovering), students are reduced to passivity, and memorization rather than cognition takes place.[13]

Knowledge arises out of the interaction of present experience

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[11]Ibid., 184.

[12]Ibid., 8.

[13]Ibid.

with what has been previously known. Both present experiences and historical memory act as sources of knowledge.

Creativity becomes possible in the present. The person who interacts with the past and engages in dialogue with present experience cannot be satisfied with allowing things to remain the same. Groome states: "If the present is allowed to do no more than inherit the past, then creativity is stifled and the consequence is more domesticating than educating. True education can never settle for sameness. It is to be a leading out rather than a standing still."[14]

Groome's approach begins with present action. This emphasis indicates his grounding in the progressive school of education, and especially of religious education. His discussion of Dewey, Coe, and Bower is an appreciative reading of the impact of a philosophy grounded in present experience. Indeed, Groome's five components seem to echo the five step approach to religious education offered by William Clayton Bower, an approach that is strongly influenced by both Dewey and George Albert Coe.[15]

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[14]Ibid.

[15]Groome's five steps are: (1) present action, which is everything that is going on in the present experience of the person or community; (2) critical reflection on issues raised by engagement in present action; (3) the presentation of the Christian Story and Vision by the educator; (4) dialogue between personal stories and the shared Christian Story; and (5) dialogue between personal visions and the shared Christian Vision. Bower's five components are: (1) the lived experience of the person or community that presents a problem or an issue; (2) analysis of experience in terms of what is going on and the results of action; (3) analysis of experience in

Groome's approach consistently begins by naming present experience.[16] The educator begins by asking the participants to name their own experiences in connection with an issue. Groome makes the connections between the Christian community and its past explicit. The entire Christian tradition influences the way a Christian understands the present.

The Future

Groome's emphasis on the future dimension of Christian religious education is a significant part of his overall undrstanding of history.[17] The future is the "not yet," the dimension of time that is still potential but not currently realized. Groome describes the future dimension by the traditional term the Kingdom (or Reign) of God. Indeed, the final major component of his approach, the Christian Vision, is circumscribed by the metaphor of the Kingdom of God.[18]

The critical dimension of the future is imagination: "The

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light of past experiences that are similar to it; (4) dialogue between the two previous forms of analysis; and (5) decision as to future actions as a result of critical dialogue.

[16]See Groome, "Model C: Experience/Story/Vision," in Beautiful Upon the Mountains: A Handbook for Church Education in Appalachia, eds. D. Campbell Wyckoff and Henrietta T. Wilkinson (Memphis: Board of Christian Education, Cumberland Presbyterian Church, 1984), 101-22.

[17]See Moore, 16, 48, and, especially, 53, where she comments on the eschatological dimension of Groome's thought.

[18]Groome, Christian Religious Education, 193-5. In his later work, Groome has begun to use the more inclusive term "the Reign of God" instead of the gender-specific term "Kingdom of God." See "The Spirituality of the Religious Educator," Religious Education 83, no. 1 (Winter 1988), 9-20, for one example of this change of terminology.

reason we attend to the present and the past is that we may intend the future. But intending the future requires imagination; otherwise the future will be little more than repetition of the past."[19] The future is not predetermined; instead, Groome claims the future arises out of the present and the past. The future is appropriated as an element of Christian faith as one reflects on the implications of present experience in light of the shared past of the community of faith. The primary effect of imagination is that it brings the element of hope into the way the person interacts with the various influences on the way she or he makes sense of the Christian faith.

Groome claims that the future dimension of time is among the least developed aspects of Christian religious education: "so much of our educational efforts stifle the imagination of the participants, telling them what to think and how to think it."[20] When he states education is a leading out, he means education leads out into the future. Education does not take place exclusively in the present; instead, critical reflection on the present, in light of the past, explores the implications for the way one lives into the future. He summarizes his approach to shared Christian praxis as " a group of Christians sharing in dialogue their critical

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[19]Groome, Christian Religious Education, 186.

[20]Ibid., 187. Moore, 16 and 53, agrees with Groome's assessment, and claims the strong future dimension to his work is one of his most important contributions to the field.

reflection on present action in light of the Christian Story and its Vision toward the end of lived Christian faith.."[21]

Daniel Schipani comments on the prophetic dimension in Groome's discussion of the future. He claims that, because Groome identifies education with leading out toward the Reign of God, Groome also orients his understanding of Christian religious education toward educating justly and for justice.[22] Groome avoids claiming that only Christian educators can serve a prophetic role, but he identifies educators as being uniquely qualified to realize this tradition of responding to the call of God.[23]

Groome differs from both the progressive and the neo-orthodox understandings of the future. The neo-orthodox position, represented by H. Shelton Smith's Faith and Nurture, saw the future as being shaped entirely by the sovereign acts of God.[24] In Harrison Elliott's defense of the progressive school of religious education, God's role in the future is only a factor in its final consummation; the immediate future

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[21]Groome, Christian Religious Education, 184.

[22]Daniel S. Schipani, Religious Education Encounters Liberation Theology (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1988), 140.

[23]Groome, "The Critical Principle in Christian Education and the Task of Prophecy," 269-70.

[24]H. Shelton Smith, Faith and Nurture (New York: Scribner's, 1941).

is almost entirely identified with the work of humanity.[25]

Groome claims the future is shaped through the dialogue between the stories and visions of the Christian community and the shared Christian Story and its Vision of the Reign of God. His approach is dialectical in nature and is oriented toward the understanding of _praxis_ he adapts from Freire. The future is determined by the vision of the possibilities of the Reign of God and the ways the Christian community lives toward the possibilities by reforming its present actions.

The final issue in Groome's discussion of the future is the role of the Holy Spirit. He claims that "only with the help of the Holy Spirit can the truth be known.... When a group assembles to do Christian religious education by a shared praxis approach, it should come together in the prayerful presence of the Paraclete."[26] Groome's claims that one is led out into the future under the leadership of God's Spirit. The future is not simply a predestined given that awaits its appointed time. The future is the place in time in which the Christian Vision and the Christian Story become present:

> The Vision indeed is a critique of our present praxis and a measure of our faithfulness. But ours is also an open future, and its shape is being influenced by present

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[25]See Ibid., 127, where Smith characterizes the progressive approach as "salvation by education." Here, Smith is commenting on George Albert Coe's use of this phrase in _The Religion of a Mature Mind_ (New York: Scribner's, 1902), 249-50.

[26]Groome, _Christian Religious Education_, 201.

praxis. The Vision can only be truly known as it is
realized, and the understanding we now have of it must be
adjusted as we move toward it. Thus our present praxis
cannot be reduced to insignificance or silence in the face
of our Vision.[27]

The presence of the Holy Spirit enables us to move toward the

future and toward the Reign of God. Groome claims, "The gift

of faith is always by God's grace--is never our own doing--

and it is the Spirit who gives the increase."[28]

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[27]Ibid., 195.

[28]Groome, "Model C: Experience/Story/Vision," 108.

CHAPTER 5

Groome's Epistemology

Groome presents a distinctive understanding of epistemology. Groome's discussion differs from Gadamer's because he begins with a discussion of what he calls a biblical way of knowing. Following his treatment of the biblical way of knowing, Groome offers an examination of a praxis epistemology.

A Biblical Way of Knowing

Groome says that all education promotes some kind of knowing. He also claims that a lived Christian faith must promote human freedom and arise from a Christian faith community toward the end of increasing the faithfulness of the community.[1] His understanding of Christian knowing is:

> The nature, purpose, and context of Christian religious education calls for a way of knowing that can hold past, present, and future in a fruitful tension, that fosters free and freeing lived Christian faith, that promotes a creative relationship with a Christian community and of that community with the world.[2]

He bases his understanding of epistemology in what he considers a distinctive knowing typical of the Bible. Groome recognizes that the Bible does not present an explicit epistemology, but he does claim biblical ways of knowing the Lord are personal and intimate.

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[1]Groome, Christian Religious Education, 76-8.

[2]Ibid., 149.

Knowledge Of, Not Knowledge About

Groome distinguishes between the Hebrew word yada' and the Septuagint Greek term ginōskein.[3] He claims yada' means to know someone or something intimately, not to step back and examine the other objectively and intellectually: "For the Hebrews yada is more by the heart than by the mind, and the knowing arises not by standing back from in order to look at, but by active and intentional engagement in lived experience."[4]

This way of knowing is exhibited in two types of relationships. The first is the way the Old Testament describes the way persons come to know God. In the Hebrew mindset, the operative phrase is knowing the Lord, not knowing about the Lord. According to Groome, the Hebrew word yada' indicates entering into a particular kind of relationship with God in which one comes to know God as Creator, savior, help in time of trouble, deliverer, and strength. The Hebrew term differs from the Greek word ginōskein, which, Groome claims "has a predominant meaning of 'intellectual looking at' an object of scrutiny and strongly connotes objectivity."[5]

Knowing the Lord requires the individual and community to acknowledge and obey God. Knowing the Lord requires doing the will of God. As Groome suggests in a later work, knowing

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[3]Ibid., 141-45.

[4]Ibid., 141.

[5]Ibid.

the Lord requires walking humbly with God as one who has entered into a covenant relationship with God.[6]

The second kind of relationship is characterized by the metaphor of lovemaking. The Hebrew Old Testament consistently uses yada' as the term that describes the intimate sexual relationship between humans. Groome says this analogy demonstrates the existential and relational sense of the Hebrew word. Knowing the Lord reaches to the depths of one's soul and self-understanding. It is not an objective kind of knowledge, but a personal relationship in which two parties are directly engaged in each other's experiences.

Remembering God's Acts in History

The biblical way of knowing is relational and experiential. Groome claims this way of knowing also requires remembering and retelling the story of God's relationships with the people. A biblical way of knowing is not simply focused on present lived experience. It is always experienced in the midst of a people who are constantly informed by the stories of faith.

Both the Old and the New Testaments give witness to the necessity of this kind of memory. Groome claims:

> In the biblical understanding, then, people come to know the Lord in the midst of historical experience, by reflecting on the activity of God there, by entering into

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[6]Groome, "Walking Humbly With Our God," To Act Justly, Love Tenderly, Walk Humbly: An Agenda for Ministers, eds. Walter Brueggemann, Sharon Parks, and Thomas H. Groome (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 44-65.

a relationship with God and God's people, and by their lived response to that relationship. But their knowing is informed by and interpreted through the Story that has arisen from the previous "knowing" of God's people, and is shaped by the hopes they have in God's promise for their future. From a biblical prespective, then, Christian religious education should be grounded in a relational/experiential/reflective way of knowing that is informed by the Story of faith from Christians before us, and by the Vision toward which that Story points.[7]

A biblical way of knowing combines the intimacy of personal knowledge with knowledge of one's place within a long-term relationship between God and the people. To know in a biblical sense is to be defined as one who is nurtured in a dynamic relationship with God.

Groome is convinced there has been a major shift in the way Christian religious education understands knowledge.[8] He claims the shift is to an epistemology in which knowledge is active/reflective:

In summary, there is evidence in both general and religious education of a major shift toward an active/reflective and relational/experiential way of knowing. Religious educators can rightly claim that this is consistent with a biblical understanding of how we come to 'know God.'[9]

The biblical way of knowing Groome describes is centered on the active experience of being in relationship with God and with a community of faith.

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[7]Groome, <u>Christian Religious Education</u>, 145.

[8]Ibid., 145-49. Groome lists several twentieth-century figures in Christian religious education as examples of this shift.

[9]Ibid., 148-49.

A Praxis Way of Knowing

Groome's epistemology describes a related way of knowing: a praxis way of knowing. He finds the praxis way of knowing to be typical of the kind of Christian religious education he presents:

> It is a relational, reflective, and experiential way of knowing in which by critical reflection on lived experience people discover and name their own story and vision and, in a Christian education context, the Story and Vision of the Christian community. It thus combines the knowing which arises from present lived experience with what was known by Christians here before us. Since a praxis way of knowing always has the purpose of promoting further praxis, the knowing which arises from a reflective/experiential encounter with the Christian Story and Vision seems capable, by God's grace, of sponsoring people toward intentionally lived Christian faith.[10]

His understanding of praxis is influenced by a thorough investigation of the concept in the thought of several key philosophers, beginning with Aristotle and ending with Paulo Freire. He understands praxis to be a reflective way of acting in the world and an active way of developing theory. He describes praxis as a process "in which agent subjects reflect critically on their social/historical situation and present action therein."[11]

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[10]Ibid., 149.

[11]Groome, "A Religious Educator's Response," The Education of the Practical Theologian: Response to Joseph Hough and John Cobb's Christian Identity and Theological Education, eds. Don S. Browning, David Polk, and Ian S. Evison (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 88. He makes a similar statement in "Theology on Our Feet: A Revisionist Pedagogy for Healing the Gap Between Academia and Ecclesia," Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology, eds. Lewis S. Mudge and James N. Poling (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 69.

Groome examines the thought of Aristotle, Hegel, Marx, Habermas, Gadamer, and Freire in his major work. These six thinkers become dialogue partners with him throughout his book, and throughout his career. Of the six philosophers whom he examines, Aristotle and Freire seem the most significant influences on his understanding of praxis. Because of the connection with Part I, Groome's discussion of Gadamer is also presented.

Praxis in Aristotle

Groome identifies Aristotle's discussion of three ways of being in the world. Each of these ways of being is also a way through which understanding might arise: theoria, praxis, and poiesis.[12] Each of these three ways of being in the world (as a free person) also has its characteristic way of life: the speculative life, the practical life, and the productive life. Because each way of life represents a unique way of making sense of experience and relating to the objective world, Aristotle also speaks of the three modes as distinct ways of knowing:

> A theoria way of knowing is the quest for truth by a contemplative/reflective/nonengaged process. A praxis way of knowing is by reflective engagement in the social situation. Poiesis as a way of knowing found embodiment in and arose from 'making.'[13]

The praxis way of knowing has to do with twin moments of

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[12]Groome, "Old Task: Urgent Challenge," a response to William Bean Kennedy, Religious Education 78, no. 4 (Fall 1983): 494.

[13]Groome, Christian Religious Education, 153.

action and reflection: "The notion of praxis involves the twin moments of critical reflection and action. It is action done reflectively or reflection upon what is being done (Aristotle understood praxis as the living of an ethical life.)"[14] According to Groome, Aristotle's understanding of praxis comes from "intentional engagement with and experience of social reality."[15]

The state of mind from which praxis arises, and which is developed by praxis, is what Aristotle calls phronēsis. As Gadamer's extensive discussion of phronēsis suggests, phronēsis is the form of practical knowing by which ethical decisions are made. These decision are made on the basis of a dialogue between the ethical principle and the particular situation to which it is to be applied.

Groome also argues that praxis, "as freely chosen ethical activity, must always involve deliberate choice."[16] It involves the entire person. All aspects of what it means to be human are involved in the kinds of choices that characterize praxis.

Groome intentionally holds theoria and praxis in dialectical tension. He states:

> We must stop thinking in terms of 'putting faith into action' and 'theory into practice.' We must forge, instead, a way of knowing that holds theoria and praxis in a dialectical unity rather than a theory to practice oneway relationship. We must fashion a wholistic way of knowing

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[14]Groome, "The Critical Principle," 266.

[15]Groome, Christian Religious Education, 154.

[16]Ibid., 155.

that engages the whole person in one's existential situation. We need a way of knowing that is capable of forming and transforming as well as informing people.[17]

His shared Christian _praxis_ approach includes both critical consciousness toward present _praxis_ and critical appropriation of the Christian Story and Vision.[18] Aristotle's discussion of _praxis_ and _phronēsis_ give Groome the basis from which he develops his discussion of a _praxis_ way of knowing.

Praxis in Gadamer

Groome offers little direct discussion of Gadamer's hermeneutic. Most mention of Gadamer is found in footnotes to Groome's critique of Jürgen Habermas' work.[19] He is most appreciative of Gadamer's contributions in two areas: the importance of tradition and the emancipatory nature of hermeneutics.

The importance of tradition. Groome praises Gadamer's understanding of tradition as historically operative consciousness. He appreciates Gadamer's description of the pervasiveness of tradition, referring to the latter's analogy between the way persons live in tradition to the way fish live in water.[20]

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[17]Groome, "Old Task: Urgent Challenge," 494.

[18]Groome, "Theology On Our Feet," 69.

[19]See, for example, Groome, _Christian Religious Education_, 174, where there is a brief mention of Gadamer in Groome's section on Habermas, and 182, note 70; 203, note 23; and 204, note 24. In each instance, Groome expresses a preference for the position taken by Gadamer.

[20]Ibid., 204, note 24.

Groome's discussion of Gadamer's debate with Habermas indicates that Habermas rejects Gadamer's positive evaluation of tradition. Too great a role for tradition in the social fabric of a culture presents the potential for social and political control. Groome claims that Gadamer avoids Habermas' warning that tradition dictates to the present. Instead, Gadamer describes a dialectical relationship between tradition and the present in which the horizons of the past and present merge in the emergence of new understanding. Groome employs the insights of Gadamer's hermeneutics in two steps of his approach to Christian religious education: he presents the Christian Story and Vision, and calls for a dialectic between the Christian Story and the stories of the participants in the event of shared praxis.

Hermeneutics as emancipatory. Habermas criticizes the historical-hermeneutic sciences (including Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics) for the social and political quietism inherent in their ontological focus.[21] In essence, Habermas claims the historical-hermeneutical sciences are more interested in maintaining the past and the historical linkage with tradition than in transformation.

Groome sides with Gadamer in the debate between the two German philosophers.[22] He believes Habermas misinterprets the

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[21]Ibid., 171, where Groome indicates Habermas is critical of what he claims is the primary interest of these sciences: practical control.

[22]Ibid., 182, note 70.

function of the past in Gadamer's work. Groome says a
hermeneutical approach like Gadamer's can allow the past to
affect one's view of the world without imposing its own view
dogmatically. Indeed, Groome believes Gadamer's hermeneutic
can avoid Habermas' charge of being limited to maintenance of
the status quo; a proper hermeneutic can be emancipatory.[23]
Groome is correct when he claims that Gadamer's hermeneutic
is much more than a delivery system for an authoritarian
tradition. Hermeneutics does much more than serve as a control
mechanism for a maintenance-oriented understanding of praxis.

Paulo Freire's Praxis Approach to Education

The work of Paulo Freire is probably more influential
than any of the other philosophical roots Groome mentions.[24]
Like Freire, Groome's approach begins with the experience of
persons. Groome's understanding of praxis is also more closely
related to Freire's discussion than to any of the other
philosophers he studies. Groome and Freire agree that human
knowing begins with the awareness of one's experience.

Groome identifies three philosophical assumptions in
Freire's pedagogy: humanization is the basic human vocation;
people are capable of changing their reality; and education
is never neutral.

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[23]Ibid.

[24]Groome, Christian Religious Education, 175, where Groome
states "My first attemps to use a praxis approach in religious
education began after meeting Freire and reading his
foundational work, Pedagogy of the Oppressed."

Humanization As the Basic Human Vocation

Freire focuses upon the dehumanizing effect of libertarian forms of education, which he characterizes as using "banking" methods of education. Freire understands the banking method to function as an oppressive way of controlling everything an individual is to learn:

> In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry. The teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite, by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence. The students, alienated like the slave in the Hegelian dialectic, accept their ignorance as justifying the teacher's existence-- but unlike the slave, they never discover that they educate the teacher.[25]

The model of pedagogy he represents as banking assumes an absolutely active teacher and an equally absolutely passive student. In essence, the banking method considers the student an empty receptacle, devoid of any knowledge, into which the teacher as expert places everything that is to be learned.

The dehumanizing effect of banking models of education has led to manipulation of the social and economic base of power so that the oppressed have less and less access to the mechanisms that would allow their liberation. They are even further limited by the demoralzing effect of a lifetime of being placed in situations in which they are objectified and

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[25]Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1970), 58- 59.

considered ignorant. Freire explicitly condemns the objectifying effect of these dehumanizing pedagogies.[26]

Freire proposes a humanizing form of education that he calls conscientization (the Brazilian term is conscientizaçao). Conscientization is transformative education. It is directed toward changing the consciousness of the oppressed. The change of consciousness he discusses results in a new understanding of both education and theology. He states, "consciousness is not changed by lessons, lectures and eloquent sermons but by the action of human beings on the world."[27]

Freire's own pedagogy is oriented toward an understanding of praxis that is influenced by Hegel and Marx. His pedagogy is both intersubjective and dialogical in nature.[28] Freire understands praxis to involve action and reflection in a constant flow that has no termination. He emphasizes that conscientization is a becoming, not a state of existence that can be limited to a static place in time. Conscientization is oriented toward praxis. Freire claims the interaction between teacher and student moves back and forth between theoretical

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[26]Ibid., 55. See also Freire's monograph, "Education, Liberation and the Church," Study Encounter 9; no. 1 (1973); in which Freire ties his critique of ideological control to the work of the churches and calls for a radicalization of the efforts of the church in support of liberation.

[27]Freire, "Education, Liberation, and the Church," 2.

[28]See Freire's chart comparing the Theory of Revolutionary Action with the Theory of Oppressive Action in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 131.

reflection and dynamic action. <u>Praxis</u> is always action <u>and</u> reflection: "Thus there is a unity between practice and theory in which both are constructed, shaped and reshaped in constant movement from practice to theory, then back to new practice."[29]

Conscientization involves giving voice to the people and listening to the generative words by which they describe their own reality.[30] Freire began his career by addressing the issue of literacy in his native Brazil. But, informed by the educational implications of his reading of Marx and Hegel, he refused to try to teach adults to read by imposing readers or curricular material from a literate society. Instead, he and his colleagues attempted to help the peasants teach themselves to read. Freire moved into the villages for an extended period of time and observed daily life. They listened to the words that most frequently arose in casual conversation. They shared in stories of oppression and in expressions of joy and celebration. As they observed and participated in the life of the people, they kept track of the words that seemed to describe the vision of the world within the community. These generative words became the content of the literacy curriculum

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[29]Ibid., 3.

[30]See Douglas E. Wingeier, "Generative Words in Six Cultures," <u>Religious Education</u> 75, no. 5 (September-October, 1980): 563-76. Wingeier describes generative words as "words that people use to name their world."

they used.[31]

True education results in the transformation of the situation of the people, not just a change in the ideas in their minds. As many of Freire's critics and supporters have suggested, his pedagogy combines the insights of liberation theology with Dewey's emphasis on the concepts of democracy and schooling.[32] Dewey's influence is also felt in Freire's description of his pedagogy as a problem-solving methodology.

People Are Capable of Changing Their Realities

Freire is optimistic about the ability of human beings to transform their situations, even when those persons are being oppressed by powerful sociopolitical conditions. His process of developing generative words has a dual purpose: to identify the experience of the people and name the forces that oppress them, and to make the people consciously aware of the potential power that is theirs when they recapture a sense of dignity and identity. Wingeier says:

> As they learned to use their generative words and to
> understand their generative themes, they became
> conscientized about their circumstances, learned to think
> critically about their world, overcame their silence and

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[31]See especially Paulo Freire, Education for Critical Consciousness (New York: Continuum, 1987), 3-20, in which he explains the origins of his advocacy of literacy and the development of his revolutionary pedagogy, and Literacy: Reading the Word and the World, which he wrote with Donald Macedo (Amherst, Mass.: Bergin & Garvey, 1987), one of his most recent reflections on the conscientization process of literacy.

[32]Mary Poplin makes the latter point in "A Practical Theory of Teaching and Learning: The View from Inside the Transformative Classroom," unpublished manuscript, 1990.

passive acceptance of things as they were, became empowered with a new sense of their own dignity and capacity for "cultural action for freedom," and began to engage together in joint action for change.[33]

Freire emphasizes the centrality of dialogue in his understanding of conscientization. Dialogue is "The encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world."[34] He discusses several conditions necessary for true dialogue: dialogue cannot occur when some want to name the world and others cannot, dialogue cannot exist in the absence of love, dialogue cannot exist without humility, dialogue requires an intense faith in humankind, dialogue is founded on mutual trust, dialogue cannot exist without hope, and dialogue requires critical thinking.[35]

Groome supports Freire's assumptions about dialogue and seems influenced by Freire's basic understanding of praxis. The element of Freire's analysis that seems most influential on Groome's approach is the emphasis on conscientization as critical consciousness.[36] Like Freire, Groome claims a pedagogy that encourages critical thinking acheieves several purposes. First, the process Freire calls "decoding" reality helps persons recognize the ways they have become enculturated to accept the social situation that enslaves them. Second,

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[33]Wingeier, 564.

[34]Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 76.

[35]Ibid., 76-81.

[36]Groome, Christian Religious Education, 176.

conscientization "disposes people to act and arises from reflection on their historical experience."[37] Groome and Freire both understand education as transformation.

Education Is Never Neutral

Freire believes education is an intensely political activity. Education is never neutral; it is always oriented toward a social and political agenda. Mary Poplin says "critical pedagogy is predicated on the fact that schools reproduce within their boundaries the values and prejudices of the larger society."[38]

Freire's basic claim is that the necrophilic approaches to education he criticizes are oriented toward the maintenance of the status quo. They tend to control persons by integrating them into conformity with existing society and transmitting the dominant values of the society at large as shared values all members of society must internalize.

The other option, which Freire claims should be the agenda of critical pedagogy, is for education to liberate persons by helping them deal critically and creatively with their situation. The purpose of his praxis pedagogy is to help persons transform their world, not adapt to it. Groome believes that Freire's methodology of education is to be an exercise in freedom.

Groome does not accept everything Freire has to say about

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[37]Ibid.

[38]Poplin, unpublished manuscript, n.p.

radical pedagogy. He also criticizes Freire on several counts. First, Groome claims that Freire never presents a clear definition of what he means by praxis. Because Freire's career has focused almost exclusively on literacy, Groome wonders whether Freire's praxis pedagogy is applicable to other issues besides literacy.

Second, Groome criticizes Freire's limited view of history. He claims Freire's agenda is so intently oriented toward critical reflection on the present experience of domination and oppression and the implications for the future transformation of that experience through critical pedagogy that he neglects the past. "He sounds at times, as Habermas does, as if nothing from the past is to be made available again to people in the present."[39]

Groome's shared Christian praxis approach tries to answer the lack of an effective sense of the past. His utilization of the Christian Story, as well as of the individual stories of the persons in community, are ways Groome attempts to correct this deficiency in Freire's pedagogy. Freire is extremely important in what Groome presents, but Groome does not accept Freire's pedagogy uncritically.

Groome's examination of the philosophical roots of praxis is an exercise in dialogue. In each case, he presents the basic argument of his dialogue partner, offers a list of the contributions he considers important, and offers criticisms

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[39]Groome, Christian Religious Education, 176.

as well. His shared Christian <u>praxis</u> approach to Christian religious education incorporates the contributions of his dialogue partners, while using these contributions in combination with the insights of his own background in theological and educational training to produce a unique approach to the work of Christian religious education.

CHAPTER 6

Groome's Shared Christian <u>Praxis</u> Approach

Groome defines shared Christian praxis as: <u>"a group of</u>
<u>Christians sharing in dialogue their critical reflection on</u>
<u>present action in light of the Christian Story and its Vision</u>
<u>toward the end of lived Christian faith.</u>"[1] He presents five
movements of education by shared <u>praxis</u>:

1. The participants are invited to name their own activity
concerning the topic for attention (present action).
2. They are invited to reflect on why they do what they do,
and what the likely or intended consequences of their
actions are (critical reflection).
3. The educator makes present to the group the Christian
community Story concerning the topic at hand and the faith
response it invites (Story and Vision).
4. The participants are invited to appropriate the Story
to their lives in a dialectic with their own stories
(dialectic between Story and stories).
5. There is an opportunity to choose a personal faith
response for the future (dialectic between Vision and
visions).[2]

Present Action As the Starting Place

Groome's model begins with the present experience of the
community and the individuals within it. One lives in the
present, and it is only in the present that one learns about
the faith and experiences the world. By beginning with present
action, Groome places himself in the educational tradition of
the liberal/progressive school of religious education, that
includes Dewey, Coe, and William Clayton Bower. Marx and

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[1]Groome, <u>Christian Religious Education</u>, 184; Italics in
original.

[2]Ibid., 207-208. The same five steps appear in his later
work, with only minor variations; see "A Religious Educator's
Response," 88-91, and "Theology On Our Feet," 70-74.

Freire also begin their enterprises with present experience.

Groome's work on curriculum reflects the way his approach is actualized. His contribution to "Beautiful Upon the Mountains" is a case in point. This volume was developed by the Joint Educational Development and the Commission on Religion in Appalachia (CORA). It presents three models of Christian religious education that take the unique context of life in the Appalachian region seriously that were created by Frederick C. Doscher, Edward N. McNulty, and Thomas Groome. Instead of importing external models of education into the region, this project attempts to develop Christian religious education approaches that emerge from the experience of those who live in the region.[3]

Groome develops what he characterizes as an ESV (Experience-Story-Vision) model for use in this setting. After discussing the theoretical basis for his approach, he outlines the steps in this approach. Except for beginning with a focusing activity, the approach he presents here is identical with what he describes in <u>Christian Religious Education</u>.[4]

The purpose of beginning his approach with present experience seems to be to help participants name their <u>own</u> experience. Over the centuries, many approaches to Christian

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[3]Groome, "Model C: Experience/Story/Vision," in <u>Beautiful Upon the Mountains</u>, 101-22.

[4]Groome's most recent work has included a focusing activity; see "A Religious Educator's Response," 88, and "Theology On Our Feet," 70.

religious education have been oriented toward telling persons

what they were to believe. Groome begins by asking persons to

name their own experience with the topic under discussion:

> The purpose of this first movement is to bring the
> participants to an expression/naming of their own praxis
> of the theme or focus as they recognize it in their
> historical experience. Thus, depending on the topic and
> context, the first movement invites participants to express
> their own understanding, feeling, reaction, sentiment,
> overt activity, valuing, meaning making, truth, belief, and
> the like (thus praxis, broadly defined), around the
> particular theme.[5]

The starting point for shared Christian <u>praxis</u> is to name

present action and personal experience.

Groome modifies Freire's similar beginning point with

present experience. Freire recognizes that this experience

among the oppressed is always an experience of domination and

oppression. The first step in his pedagogy is to gain enough

trust within the community that the people will share their

own experiences with him and name their suffering in an

oppressive society. Groome does not make the same assumptions

about the inevitability of oppression. Instead, the present

action he discusses in his writings includes such questions

as, "What does the Eucharist mean in your life?" "What is the

purpose of Christian education in your parish?" or "What can

you name at your university that promotes or prevents

education for social justice?" Whereas Freire's method is

necessarily political and radical, Groome's starting point is

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[5]Groome, "Theology on Our Feet," 70. Both Third World
liberation theologies and feminist theologies focus on present
experience as the beginning point of theology as well.

concerned with sharing one's experience within the community of the church and its institutions of socialization. Freire begins with persons' naming their pain and mistreatment; Groome begins with persons' naming their experience in the life of the community.

Groome's first step is understood from the perspective of praxis. He does not ask questions that are intended to be theoretical in nature; they always involve one's participation in action. The first step of his approach conceives of the educator as the one who facilitates the participation of the persons in the group. He or she asks questions of clarification so each person is enabled to name her or his own experience fully. The more recent addition of a focusing activity to his approach helps direct the activity toward a particular topic more clearly. This activity also demonstrates the educator's responsibility to develop an atmosphere of trust and foster a sense of identity.[6]

Critical Reflection on Stories and Visions

Once persons have identified their own experience and their own Stories, Groome helps persons reflect on why they do what they do. He helps them hypothesize about the potential consequences of their actions. He refers to this step as critical reflection. Groome states:

This second movement is first looking discerningly at

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[6]See ibid., where Groome claims one purpose of the focusing activity is to help persons identify their "generative themes" and identify "who are we."

present action to see the 'obvious' about it, but it is also an attempt to go below the obvious, to become aware of its source, the genesis of present action. In this the movement attempts to help participants come to a consciousness of the social conditioning, norms, assumptions, and the like that are embodied in their present action.[7]

The component of critical reflection involves critical memory of the past, critical reason to evaluate the present, and creative imagination to envision the future.[8] The term "critical" refers to an attitude toward one's consciousness of an issue by which one may affirm what is good in present action, recognize what limitations exist in that action, and attempt to move beyond present action toward something new.[9] Imagination is necessary for the final, creative move in his dialectic.

The second element in the term is reflection. Reflection is both rational and affective. Groome recognizes the affective aspects of the activity as well. Head and heart are inevitably fused in reflection; reflection is both self-reflection and reflection on the subject matter.

Groome recognizes that dissonance may arise as participants reflect critically on their stories and visions. Indeed, as Gadamer suggests, it is precisely the strangeness of the encounter between subjects in dialectical relationship that creates the tension necessary for something new to emerge

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[7]Groome, <u>Christian Religious Education</u>, 211.

[8]Ibid., 185-86.

[9]Ibid., 188.

from the interaction. There is always risk in sharing and reflecting upon one's own stories. One must make himself or herself vulnerable to the other in order to grow. It is in the strangeness of the critical reflection on one's own actions that change, development, and growth occur.

The primary task of the second movement is, "to enable participants (the educator included) to reflect critically on their present action, their reasons for it, and the consequences of it."[10] The second movement is dialogical in nature. The action in this movement is characterized by a mutual exchange between the educator and the student. The educator does not <u>tell</u> the student what the experience of faith is; the educator and the student share in a reflective dialogue about their personal stories.

The Christian Community's Story and Vision

In the third movement, Groome describes the educator as the active agent in the act of teaching:

> Normally the Story and its Vision are made available to the group by the educator....It is crucial that the Story and Vision made accessible to the group be an accurate representation of the faith understanding of the broader Christian community in whose name the educating is being carried on.[11]

The responsibility for teaching the "accurate representation of the faith," for making the shared Story of the community accessible to the students, falls on the educator or a trained

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[10]Ibid., 213.

[11]Ibid., 214.

associate of the educator. As Groome recognizes, "[t]his is the most obviously catechetical movement in the process."[12] However, Groome warns that this movement is still to be considered dialogical, and not monological in nature.

The third movement is the point at which Groome's approach diverges most widely from Freire's. In the first place, it is in this movement that Groome makes his approach historically conscious. Making the historical tradition accessible is the step in which the person becomes connected with the shared Story of the church.[13]

Groome claims the Story and Vision need to be presented in a disclosure, rather than a closure manner. Authoritarian approaches to education and religion alike present the tradition as absolute and irrefutable fact. The material is presented as a command; dialogue is stifled. The direction of information in authoritarian approaches moves from the expert (teacher) to the passive receptacle (student.) This approach is what Freire calls the banking method of education. Groome claims education discloses the truth within the tradition, including but not limited to the Bible. The educator makes this tradition accessible to those who intend to learn.

Groome's attention to the effects of history and the

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[12]Ibid.

[13]Groome frequently gives credit to his colleague at Boston College, Mary Boys, for the use of the term "making accessible" as descriptive of the task of Christian religious education. See her book, <u>Biblical Interpretation in Religious Education</u>, especially 293.

consciousness of those effects is one of the distinctive ways he has moved beyond the bias toward the present and the future in Freire. The problem with his description of the process in this movement is that it seems prone to abuse by the educator or pastor who sees himself or herself as the resident theologian of the community. Such a person might exercise the opportunity to impose her or his own dogmatic opinions on the understanding of the persons in the community.

Freire envisions the educator as one who codifies what the people say about their shared experience and mirrors those generative words back to the people through word-pictures. Groome sees the educator as the one who presents the community's Story and its Vision of the Reign of God to the people in the community. Groome sees the educator as the one who represents the "accurate... faith undertsanding of the broader Christian community in whose name the educating is being carried on."[14] Groome emphasizes the dialectical nature of the presentation of the Story and Vision and the necessity of the educator leading the participants in critical reflection on that Story and Vision. Groome corrects Freire's devaluation of the past by including the tradition of the church as a dialogue partner in his approach. However, he also seems to claim the historical tradition of the church is authoritative in its dialogue with the present experience of persons.

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[14]Groome, Christian Religious Education, 214.

Dialectic: The Christian Story and Participants' Stories

Groome characterizes this movement by the tentative question, "What does the community's Story mean for (affirm, call in question, invite beyond) our stories, and how do our stories respond to (affirm, recognize limits of, push beyond) the community Story?"[15] The fourth movement is a dialogue between critical reflection on present action and critical remembrance of the Christian Story. Groome does not mean for any one of these elements to be superior to any other. The Story challenges as well as affirms, consoles as well as criticizes. Conversely, our individual stories and the stories of our specific communities critique the overall Story. As a result, the Story itself begins to be transformed. The shared Christian Story changes as it interacts with persons who live out their faith in the world and reflect critically on that experience.

Freire would agree that the dialectical encounter of critical pedagogy inevitably creates something new. Like Groome, he emphasizes the dialogical, dialectical interaction of education. Groome states that:

> [T]he vital task to be promoted by the educator in the fourth movement is two-fold: that lived faith experience be informed by the Christian faith tradition and that the appropriating of the tradition be informed by, and be in the context of, lived experience.[16]

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[15]Ibid., 217.

[16]Ibid., 220.

Dialectic: Christian Vision and Partcipants' Visions

The final movement of Groome's approach involves another moment of dialectic: between the shared Christian Vision of the Reign of God and the development of one's own visions of what it means to live as a Christian in light of the Vision. Groome addresses the implications for new action in this movement. The question behind this movement is, "How will one live toward the Vision of the Reign of God?" Something of the Christian Vision is already present in the community. But there is also a "not-yetness" in God's ongoing self-revelation. The Reign of God in its fullness has not yet arrived.

Groome contends that this final movement most appropriately asks such questions as, "How will we (or you) act in the future, in light of our present lived experience, our critically remembered past, and our sense that God is calling us onward?" In this dialectic, Groome emphasizes the necessity of an individual faith response at the conclusion of the process.[17] It is not sufficient to reflect on what all this activity might mean; that would result in both intellectual theory and political quietism. Praxis-directed education always leads beyond the present and asks questions about the implications for the future.

Groome claims the educator helps create an environment

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[17]Ibid., 220.

of openness in which participants may feel free to explore the options available for living toward the future. Once again, he emphasizes the internal linkage between past, present, and future. The choices one might make are not infinitely. Like Mary Elizabeth Moore, Groome emphasizes both continuity with the past and the necessity and inevitability of change.

Freire also ends his pedagogy with the necessity of change and the development of new action out of the praxis of the community. However, his understanding of new action and change are more characterized by social and political transformation than Groome's understanding. For Groome, change is change within the system of the community of faith. In many ways, Groome's approach does not imply social and political change as much as the liberal/progressive approach to education in the early twentieth century.[18] Like Gadamer's understanding of praxis, Groome's process could easily result in nothing being changed but one's mind.

Contributions of Groome's Approach

Groome's shared Christian praxis model of Christian religious education has been influential on the recent development of the field. There are four primary contributions that might be identified: he emphasizes continuity among past, present, and future while also recognizing the necessity of transformation; he consistently recognizes the important

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[18]See footnote 15, page 158 of the dissertation, where Groome's model is compared with William Clayton Bower's.

effect of the past on both the present and the future; he insists that Christian religious education is dialogical/dialectical in nature; and he emphasizes the community as the setting for shared Christian praxis.

The Integration of Continuity and Transformation

Daniel Schipani praises approaches to Christian religious education that take liberation theology seriously and includes both Thomas Groome and Mary Elizabeth Moore in that list:

> The correctives proposed by Groome and Moore affirm the integrity and the integration of continuity and transformation for the discipling task of religious education. These correctives strive to keep in dialectical tension and bring into a creative new synthesis the strengths and contributions of both a socialization/enculturation model and the reconstructionist model in religious education.[19]

One of the chief contributions of Groome's work is his insistence that Christian religious education must take the historic witness of the church seriously. One who is brought up within the church is given a certain kind of distinctive language, a particular orientation toward the Bible, and a world-view that is present before one's awareness of its effect upon him or her.

Groome's insistence on the dialogue between the Christian Story and the stories of the persons within the community gives Christian religious education in the shared praxis approach a strong sense of history that is lacking in

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[19]Schipani, 190. See also Letty Russell, "Handing on Traditions and Changing the World," Tradition and Transformation, ed. Padraic O'Hare (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1979), 73-86.

liberation theology and in Freire's pedagogy. Like Moore, Groome celebrates the role of tradition in the community. Moore's own model goes beyond Groome in also identifying the significant roles of Tradition (that which God presents) and traditioning (the process by which the past interacts with the present at the intersection of continuity and change.) For Groome, it is sufficient to claim the importance of history and recognize the dialectic between the shared Story of the historic community and the present stories of persons of faith.

Groome also claims the past interacts with a Vision for the future realization of the Reign of God. This Vision is one of transformation, not stagnation. The past is never used as closure and final answers to the questions of human existence, but comes into dialogue with the present with a view toward the unfolding transformation of the world. Like Moore, he sees the future as already present in an incomplete form in the ability to imagine and create. All education should be transformative because dialectic demands such to be the case.

The Importance of the Past

Groome claims the past plays a positive role in the way persons come to understand the present and live toward the future. Like Gadamer, Groome emphasizes the historicity of persons. He claims that tradition serves to limit the possible

options for interpretation of the Christian Story.[20] The past also roots one in an ongoing Story, instead of allowing one to be caught up in the contemporary malaise of cultural normlessness.

Groome understands the Bible to be a part of the historic tradition that exerts its effects on the present. The Bible is a necessary part of that Story, but it is not a sufficient part. One who engages in shared praxis is affected by the cumulative effect of centuries of telling and retelling the Story. Biblical material is presented in a dialogue with personal experience. The Bible is never used as an authoritarian voice that imposes its view of God and the people of God upon the participants.

Groome Approaches the Bible Dialogically

Groome describes several versions of his work with small groups in churches, colleges, and other organizations. In each, he outlines the process of shared praxis in which there is a constant interaction between the past, present, and future and an active sharing relationship between the so-called teacher (he prefers the term educator) and the participants in the group. The relationship he establishes is dialectical in nature. The past is not dominant over the present. The experience of the interpreter is not dominant

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[20]Dwayne Huebner, "The Language of Religious Education," Tradition and Transformation, 101, states "without the identification of predecessors, readers are left to their own interpretation and are lost or not located historically."

over the shared Christian Story. Instead, Groome proposes a dialogical/dialectical approach to the Bible.

Groome and Mary Boys present an illustration of the dialectical understanding of the Bible.[21] They identify two primary questions: "what is the Bible that we carry?" and "who are we who carry it?"[22] Groome claims our dialectic with the Bible offers two sources for knowing: "there is the Book itself, and there is the lived, existential, and historical knowing that we bring to the Book."[23]

Boys and Groome also make it clear that the Bible is not to be understood as an objective pile of facts stuck in a dusty and inaccessible past. Instead, as Boys says, "The Bible is primarily a book we take with us on our life's journey, not merely a book we enshrine in a museum."[24] We engage in critical dialogue with the Bible, which is a classic text, one which, though written in the past, nevertheless speaks as though it were written for the present and the future.[25]

The dialectical nature of the Bible is also found in the sense that discovering meaning in the subject matter of the Bible leads persons to understand themselves in a new way. Not

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[21]Mary C. Boys and Thomas H. Groome, "Principles and Pedagogy in Biblical Study," _Religious Education_ 77, no. 5 (September-October 1982): 486-507.

[22]Ibid., 487.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Ibid., 488-89.

[25]Ibid., 492.

only does the interpreter always bring something of herself or himself to the interpretive act, one actually becomes a new person through the interaction with the Bible he calls shared praxis. The agenda of biblical study is not simply to discover what the Bible says, but also to encounter what the Bible calls us to become. The final element in Groome's approach employs creative imagination as one seeks to engage in a dialogue between one's own visions for the future and the Christian Vision of the Reign of God.

Set Within the Community

Groome avoids the individualism and quietism that seems to limit Gadamer's hermeneutic by grounding shared Christian praxis within the community. One of the central assumptions behind his approach is the existence of the faith community and the experience of persons within that community. One not only hears the Story and Vision within this kind of setting, one experiences the meaning of the Story and Vision by interacting with persons whose lives have been affected by them. When the Story and Vision are shared, they are shared as the community's common experience, not as objective fact or external experience. It is our Story and Vision being shared.

Limitations in Groome's Approach

One can also identify at least three limitations in Groome's approach. First, his discussion of the Christian Story seems to lack the kind of rigorous critical reflection

that he discusses in the other movements of his approach. Second, he presents an understanding of _praxis_, and especially of critical reflection on _praxis_, that is primarily objective in nature. And third, there seems to be some question about whether the approach he presents can legitimately be called a _praxis_ approach.

Lack of Critical Reflection on the Church's Story

Groome emphasizes critical reflection throughout his approach. However, there is a sense in which critical reflection is limited to present experience. Marion Pardy suggests that Groome's third movement, in which the educator presents the Christian Story, seems to have "no awareness that this material in itself requires critical reflection initially by the presenter(s) followed by the participants."[26]

Groome insists on dialectical encounter between the experience of the participants and the tradition of the Church. However, it is not clear whether he believes the interpreter affects and transforms the tradition. He recognizes the transformative nature of the past on the experience of the person within the community; he seems less clear of the influence of present interpretation and future action on the nature of the tradition itself.[27]

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[26]Pardy, 119.

[27]Ibid. She considers Gadamer's understanding of dialectic with the past more appropriate for teaching the Bible to children than Groome's approach, because she considers Gadamer's approach more of an encounter with the effective-history of the text.

Groome's discussion of the critical dimension of his approach seems quite strong when he describes reflection on present experience. He is also convincing when he discusses the critical element in what one is to become. However, the past is the only dimension that is presented by an expert (or one trained by an expert.) The past is brought into the conversation as an authoritative Story. Even in his more recent work, Groome limits the critical element of this movement to the technical work of "experts in the various subdisciplines of theology."[28] Groome is critical of those who would make Christian religious educators the delivery mechanism for the real work of theologians.[29] Yet, it seems odd that this movement in his approach leaves little opportunity for critical engagement with the Story, which is delivered to the people with the critical work already done by the "experts."

To be fair, one must also admit that Groome's movements cannot be taken as separate stages of interpretation. One does not finish one movement completely and then move on to the next. Instead, the presentation of the Story always results in critical questions being raised by persons as they begin

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[28]Groome, "Theology On Our Feet," 72.

[29]Groome, "A Religious Educator's Response" argues for Christian religious education as practical theology.

to dialogue with tradition.[30]

Objective Understanding of Praxis

Mary Elizabeth Moore suggests that Groome's understanding of the "critical reflection on present action in light of the historical tradition and future hope" tends to be primarily objective in nature.[31] She explains that critical reflection "is stepping back from an idea or event and critiquing it from various points of view."[32]

She compares Groome's objective understanding of critical reflection with what she calls a more subjective approach in the work of Ross Snyder. Snyder engages in depth reflection, in which one enters the world of the topic, issue, or person being studied. Moore argues that, "Education for continuity and change needs to maximize both the subjectivity of depth reflection and the objectivity of critical reflection."[33]

Is Groome's Approach Really Praxis?

The final limitation of Groome's approach concerns his understanding of praxis. He spends much time discussing the historical background of praxis. However, it is unclear how his approach to Christian religious education utilizes the

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[30]Groome, "Theology On Our Feet," 73, states that the third movement frequently dovetails into the fourth as participants ask critical questions. The irony is that most of Groome's examples of his own action in the third movement are lectures or oral presentations.

[31]Moore, 130.

[32]Ibid.

[33]Ibid., 131.

insights of the Marx/Freire understanding of _praxis_. Marx and Freire understand _praxis_ to be intensely political in nature. Groome seems to understand _praxis_ as essentially a hermeneutical and ontological category. The purpose of _praxis_ in shared Christian _praxis_ seems related to the being of the Christian more than to new action. At the end of his process, the dialectic between the Christian Vision and personal visions for the future seems to ask "Who am I to become?" more frequently than it asks, "In what ways can I help transform the world?"

Groome's five-step approach seems more closely related to William Clayton Bower's five steps for religious education than to Freire's critical pedagogy in teaching literacy in the Third World.[34] The one step that seems furthest from Freire's understanding of _praxis_ is Groome's final step. Here (choosing a personal faith response for the future in a dialectic between the Christian Vision and personal visions,) Groome seems to understand the newness that results from shared _praxis_ to be a personal faith response, whereas for Freire, _praxis_ always leads to new action to transform one's present situation. Groome states:

> Remembering again our comprehensive description of action, the decision for future action here can be a decision for overt activity, or it can be an articulation of a new awareness, understanding, sentiment, feeling, hope, and so on. It could also be a decision for further reflection and

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[34]See note 15, page 158 of the dissertation, in which Bower and Groome are compared.

attempts at clarification.[35]

Freire claims _praxis_ always results in transformation; transformation of theory is a part of that dialectic of action and reflection, but it cannot be accomplished without reform of action. Groome seems to imply that _praxis_ can be limited to changed emotions and changed intellect, without necessarily involving a change in the social and political condition of the world. He makes it clear the dialectic between the Christian Story/Vision and the present stories and visions of the people should be a response to the presence of the Reign of God, at least proleptically. But he presents examples of the result of his model being limited to new insight, instead of the kind of humanization he praises as the greatest contribution of Freire's work.[36]

Groome's approach to Christian religious education is a striking example of dialogue between the Christian Story and its Vision of the Reign of God and the present experience and future hopes of persons within communities affected by the Story and its Vision. The depth of background in the philosophical tradition and the history of Christian religious education in his work is commendable. The model of Christian religious education within the congregation as a hermeneutical community developed in the dissertation seeks to engage in a dialectical encounter between Groome's work and the

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[35]Groome, _Christian Religious Education_, 221.

[36]Ibid., 175.

philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer. The author trusts the effort is a worthy one.

PART III

INTERSUBJECTIVITY AND <u>PRAXIS</u>:

SWIRLING WINDS OF FAITH

PART III

Intersubjectivity And <u>Praxis</u>:

Swirling Winds Of Faith

Christian religious education is not simply an ideal type of activity. It does not exist in a state of perfection, nor is it resident solely in the mind of God. Christian religious education is situated in history, and is located in particular faith community contexts. Over the years, various theories of Christian religious education have come and gone, each making its claim to describe the nature of the field. However, many of these theories have presented the concept of Christian religious education as it ought to be instead of relating it to the contexts where persons actually experience the Christian faith: the communities within which persons become immersed in the Story (Groome) and become caught up in the flow of tradition (Gadamer.)

Christian religious education as intersubjective <u>praxis</u> is based in the congregation. The kind of interpersonal, intimate, intersubjective dialogue that characterizes the work of Gadamer and Groome is possible only in smaller groups. Indeed, one criticism of Gadamer's understanding of the Greek <u>polis</u> has been the naivete of assuming an entire society can and will structure itself with the kind of respect, openness, risk-taking, and listening he assumes for such a community. Unfortunately, few congregations have demonstrated the ability to construct themselves along these lines.

The model presented in Part III makes certain assumptions. The first is that Christian religious education as intersubjective <u>praxis</u> is best understood in its congregational form. The focus here is on the way the congregation defines itself and identifies its calling.

The second assumption is that the congregation is a community, and a particular type of community: a community of faith. This is the claim of Chapter 7. The discussion draws upon the work of Evelyn E. Whitehead and James Whitehead, C. Ellis Nelson, Charles Foster, James Hopewell, Mary Elizabeth Moore, as well as the contributions of Gadamer and Groome. The congregation as community is presented as the basic image upon which the model is based.

A third assumption directs the work behind Chapter 8: the congregation as community can best be defined as a hermeneutical community. The congregation is understood as dialectical in nature. Its internal construction is a constantly changing dynamic of interaction, dialogue, and conversation. The congregation's members are engaged in dialogue with the Scripture in a way that involves in-depth study of the message contained there. The message is a constantly challenging one which leads persons to an ongoing, ever-changing evaluation of the actions they perform in living their faith.

The congregation is also in constant dialogue with the situation of the larger community within which it is situated.

C. Ellis Nelson suggests that one area in which the church has abandoned its responsibilities on behalf of God's will for the gospel has been its tendency to blur the boundaries between the church and the community.[1] He believes the church needs to commit itself to its role in transforming the larger community as a result of its own self-transforming activity of enculturation.

The congregation needs to take its role as a hermeneutical community seriously. It must interact with its immediate geographical setting. This is particularly true when the congregation is located in an urban setting. In many cases, the congregation's members are suburban, relatively affluent, professional, and well educated. However, the immediate neighborhood in which the congregation is situated may be depressed, may represent a much lower socioeconomic level than the members, and may be fraught with the litany of problems emerging in urban life: high rates of crime and illiteracy, problems with homelessness, alcohol and drug abuse, and the loss of identity and self-esteem when persons become lost in the maze of urban sociopolitical issues.

The congregation needs to become a hermeneutical community. This means it must engage in dialogue with the larger community that surrounds it geographically. It must respond to the needs of the people who hear its chimes and watch its well-dressed members attend services of worship. The

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[1]Nelson, 201.

congregation must also engage in a dialogical form of hermeneutics with the texts of its faith: the Bible. If the congregation ignores either dialogue partner, it becomes guilty of idle chatter or blind activism.[2]

The model presented in Chapter 9 uses the metaphor of a swirling winds of faith. This metaphor captures the dynamic character of the _praxis_ approaches presented in the studies of Gadamer and Groome. Like swirling winds, the congregation as a hermeneutical community is formed within a complex interaction of several environmental factors. There are multiple directions of movement of the wind currents, complex relationships between warm, moist air masses and cold, heavy air masses, and so forth. Likewise, the congregation as a hermeneutical community is constantly pulled by the interactions between its experiences, its sense of vocation, its desires to know, and its need to help persons. Finally, one form of the swirling winds, the tornado, is full of awesome power and the potential threat of destruction. Congregations can be similarly filled with the potential for either powerful work or destructive behavior. Many never actively respond to the factors impinging upon them and end up being "tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine." (Ephesians 4:14)

The final chapter concludes with a brief evaluation of

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[2]Freire, _Pedagogy of the Oppressed_, 75-76, makes this point.

the possible contributions this model might make to the field of Christian religious education in general. It will include a description of the kind of congregation that might model such an approach to intersubjective _praxis_. The congregation as a hermeneutical community is full of promise; it remains to be seen whether it is also practical, or whether the model has succumbed to the tendency to produce yet another theoretical exercise in futility.

CHAPTER 7

The Congregation As Community

In recent years, some of the more influential work in the field of practical theology and in Christian religious education has centered on describing the situation of the congregation. James Hopewell's only published book, Congregation: Stories and Structures, has set the stage for attention to several ethnographic studies of specfic congregations.[1] In addition, Jackson Carroll, Carl Dudley, Alice and Robert Evans, Whitehead and Whitehead, and Don Browning have written important studies that have focused on local expressions of theology for understanding the nature of the church.[2]

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[1]James F. Hopewell, Congregation: Stories and Structures, ed. Barbara G. Wheeler (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987.) Although this book was published very recently, and was released posthumously, Hopewell has been one of the leading figures in a movement to describe the nature of the congregation by listening to the stories of its members instead of examining its giving records, membership rolls, and lists of accomplishments. Hopewell's other work includes "A Congregational Paradigm for Theological Education," Theological Education (Autumn 1984): 60-70.

[2]For further examples of the contextual nature of these studies, see Carl S. Dudley, ed., Building Effective Ministry: Theory and Practice in the Local Church (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), in which the description of ministry is not conducted on a theoretical basis, but through the "thick description" (a term borrowed from Clifford Geertz) of the socioeconomic, political, and cultural setting of a mainline congregation in New England. See also Jackson Carroll, ed., Handbook for Congregational Studies (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986); James D. and Evelyn E. Whitehead, Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry (New York: Seabury, 1980); Alice Frazier Evans, Robert A. Evans, and William Bean Kennedy, Pedagogies for the Non-Poor, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987; and Don Browning, "Pastoral Care and the Study

Focus on the Congregation

The congregation is the manifestation of the church in which persons may most intimately experience the nature of the church as a community of faith. Congregations are not perfect. Few congregations measure up to the expectations of all their members and even fewer fit neatly into the theoretical descriptions of what congregations ought to be like. However, the congregation is a small enough community for the kind of dialogical, hermeneutical work described by Gadamer and Groome to take place.

There are several sources for understanding the congregation as a community, but three have emerged from research as deserving mention. First, the contributions of anthropological approaches to the congregation, especially ethnographic methods of investigation, allow the members of the congregation to tell their own stories. Second, liberation theology contributes attention to the local manifestation of the church as the focal point of theology. Third, transformative pedagogies, like those of Freire and the work of the base community in Solentiname, focus on the work of the people to name their own experiences of oppression, but also to name their own experiences of faith. All three sources contribute to the claim that the congregation is the center of attention for Christian religious education.

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of the Congregation (Pastoral Care in the Activist Church),"
unpublished manuscript, no date or pagination.

<u>Anthropological Contributions</u>

The rationale for the recent attention given to
congregational studies comes from several sources, but three
major streams of scholarly work have produced this phenomenon.
The first is the contributions of anthropological research,
especially the work on ethnography. In ethnographic study,
outside persons who serve as participant observers study the
group life, family life, services of worship, Bible study
groups, informal congregational time, conduct personal
interviews, study statistical data, etc. The intention of this
activity is two-fold: to listen to the stories of the people,
and to observe the processes of interaction that take place
in the life of the group itself.

During coursework at the School of Theology at Claremont,
the author had the opportunity to participate in an
ethnographic study of a Native American United Methodist
congregation as a part of a larger study being written by Mary
Elizabeth Moore.[3] The purpose of this study was to observe
the life of the congregation and its members, and to discover
unique ways in which they understood the gospel and its
implications for their lives. Throughout the study, observers
participating in the congregation listened to the stories of
congregational members, observed worship services,
participated in Bible study groups, attended church picnics,

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[3]Mary Elizabeth Moore, "Teach Us to Teach: Ethnic
Congregations Teaching Through Their Stories," unpublished
manuscript, n.d.

and a variety of other functions.

The overall picture from the study is that this congregation has made an effort to combine its experience as a Native American community with its sense of itself as a Christian and United Methodist congregation. A constant dialogue takes place among these elements of its identity; each informs the other in a variety of ways. The end result is that this congregation's experience of being a congregation is unique. No other congregations are exactly like this one. This congregation has a characteristic way of relating, of identifying its mission, and of educating its people. A congregational approach to Christian religious education or to practical theology is contextual. The nature of the church is taken to be here-and-now, set within the situation of a particular group of people. Any generalization from this congregational focus would be in the direction of describing how the insights of this setting might contribute to congregations in similar settings.

Contributions of Liberation Theology

A second source for focusing on the congregation is the increased interest in the field of practical theology.[4] James Fowler states that, "Practical theology..., is theological reflection and construction arising out of and giving guidance

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[4]Don S. Browning, ed. Practical Theology: The Emerging Field in Theology, Church, and World (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983.)

to a community of faith in the praxis of its mission."[5]
Practical theology is, by its very nature, contextual and
focused on the local expression of living out the Christian
faith.

One of the theological influences in the development of
congregational-based practical theology has been liberation
theology.[6] Practical theology focuses on the _praxis_ of the
church or of Christians living the faith. Dennis McCann
discusses an extension of _praxis_ in what he calls
"orthopraxis." Orthopraxis is critical reflection on _praxis_,
or what he calls "the right sort of praxis."[7] He says
orthopraxis "refers to the concrete struggles of 'basic
communities' seeking to give witness in a revolutionary
situation."[8]

Robert Schreiter also identifies the contribution of

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[5]Ibid., 154.

[6]Rebecca S. Chopp, "Practical Theology and Liberation,"
Formation and Reflection, 120-38, argues that liberation
theology may offer a more appropriate response to the issues
that inform practical theology than the method of correlation
utilized by David Tracy and Don Browning.

[7]Dennis P. McCann, "Practical Theology and Social Action:
Or What Can the 1980's Learn from the 1960's?," _Practical
Theology_, 111. He borrows the term "orthopraxis" from Gustavo
Guttierez.

[8]Ibid, especially 118-20. McCann is critical of
liberation theology for a number of reasons, but especially
because its focus on _praxis_ alone results in its rejection of
what he calls the "eschatological reserve" of faith in the
transcendence of God. He prefers the solution of what he calls
the "middle axioms approach" of persons like John C. Bennett
and Reinhold Niebuhr, which calls for prophetic response to
a transcendent God.

liberation theologies to practical theology by locating the appropriate work of theology in local settings.[9] Schreiter identifies three possible types of local theology. The first is translation models, in which the Christian message is freed from its "previous cultural accretions," and then translated into new situations.[10] The second type is what he calls adaptation models, in which Western (primarily North Atlantic) theological categories are assumed, but are given expression through the factors that shape the world-view of the people in a given setting.[11] The third type is what he calls contextual models:

> The contextual models, as the name implies, concentrate more directly on the cultural context in which Christianity takes root and receives expression. Whereas the adaptation models continue to emphasize somewhat more the received faith, contextual models begin their reflection with the cultural context....
> The difference between these concerns and those of the adaptation approaches is that a local theology begins with the needs of a people in a concrete place, and from there moves to the traditions of faith.[12]

The connections between Schreiter's understanding of local theology and Freire's focus on eliciting the generative words of a community are striking.[13] Indeed, Schreiter's

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[9]Robert J. Schreiter, _Constructing Local Theologies_ (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985.)

[10]Ibid., 7.

[11]Ibid., 9.

[12]Ibid., 12-3.

[13]Indeed, Schreiter mentions Freire's conscientization program as an example of the shift in perspective toward viewing a culture from the inside out ("emic") instead of from

description of the three forms of local theology sounds much like Freire's description of the three kinds of churches: traditionalist churches, which are essentially colonialist; the modernizing church, in which North American theology is used as the basis of interpreting and altering the situation of the local community; and the prophetic church, which he claims engages in the transformation of the situation of oppression.[14]

Each congregation does its own local theology. While there are certain theological issues that all Christian theologians would deal with, the contextual nature of Schreiter's local theology would suggest that each congregation needs to begin with the needs and experiences of the concrete situation of the congregation. Through critical reflection on this present experience, theology becomes practical, in contrast to fundamental theology (in which theological reflection is on common human experience) or systematic theology (in which one reflects on particular religious traditions.)[15]

Transformative Pedagogy

The primary contribution of Freire's pedagogy to the focus on the congregation is the way his work centers on the

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the outside, looking in ("etic".)

[14]Freire, "Education, Liberation and the Church," 8-15.

[15]David Tracy, "The Foundations of Practical Theology," in Practical Theology, 66-68.

present experience of the community. Freire attempts to empower the community to reflect critically on the dehumanizing effects of domination and oppression. The entire direction of his pedagogy is toward the actions of the community. He employs critical reflection to help the community recognize the effects of their objectification by the forces of oppression and of their own powers to overcome that subjugation.

The educator does not work over the people as an expert or an authority figure in Freire's method; this is the approach he calls the banking model of education. Instead, the educator works with and alongside the people as they strive to discover the generative words of the community together. His pedagogy focuses on the experience of the community and efforts to join the community in recognizing the potential of its actions toward transformation, emancipation, and liberation. The educator does not lead a revolution; she or he joins the people as they develop the appropriate ways to accomplish their emancipation.

The Gospel in Solentiname provides a striking example of this method in operation.[16] Ernesto Cardenal, the priest of Solentiname, Nicaragua, leads the peasants to reflect on their shared experience as persons oppressed by Somoza's brutal

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[16]Ernesto Cardenal, The Gospel in Solentiname, trans. Donald D. Walsh. 4 vol. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1982). See also The Gospel in Art by the Peasants of Solentiname, ed. Philip Scharper and Sally Scharper (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984).

regime. The passages from the Bible become occasions for persons to recognize how people in the past have experiences analogous to the situation of the present. The focus of the Bible studies is not on what the text says, or on what the authors meant, but on how the liberating message of the gospel applies to the situation of oppression experienced by the people of Solentiname. The art work pictures Jesus and his disciples in clothing typical of villages in Nicaragua. Nero and his soldiers become Somoza's troops. And God's message of salvation includes the liberation of the persons from the clutches of a corrupt and vicious reign of terror.

The base community in Solentiname, the local communities with which Freire works, and the congregational studies share one thing in common: the focus of theology is on the real life situations of the persons within the community. These three sources for attending to the congregation provide background for beginning the discussion of the nature of Christian religious education as intersubjective praxis in the congregational setting. The next issue to address is the nature of the congregation as a community.

The Congregation As a Community

An impressive amount has been written on the community of faith approach to Christian religious education in recent years. Many of the names in this discussion are very familiar: C. Ellis Nelson, John Westerhoff, III, Charles Foster, and many others. What each addresses is the claim that the church

is a community, and a specific kind of community: a community of faith.

Nelson's early study broke much of the ground in this discussion through his sociological and anthropological insights into the nature of culture, society, and individuals.[17] He claims that the educational activity of the congregation is, first and foremost, to enculturate persons into the community of faith. Westerhoff and Foster have begun with Nelson's assumptions, but each has moved beyond Nelson's beginning points.

Some Definitions of Community

There are probably as many definitions of community as there are persons who attempt to define the term. Evelyn and James Whitehead make several suggestions:

> We indicate two common uses of the word in ordinary conversation. Sometimes community is used to mark a special quality we experience in relationships among people. Where there is a sense of belonging, an awareness of support, a recognition that we have much in common--here there is community. This use of community to point to these feelings of solidarity might be considered a psychological use of the word. But there is another, somewhat different sense to community. Some groups of people--a parish, a neighborhood, a religious congregation--are called communities. Here the word signifies a style or structure of group life. We might call this the sociological use of

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[17]Nelson, _Where Faith Begins_. He describes the distinctions between these terms in Chapter 2, ""The Formative Power of Culture," and identifies the characteristics of culture as: a reality that endures through time, formative of selfhood, teaching the individual, defining the goals and methods of society, communicating a particular world-view, and, most importantly, sharing a sense of community values (40-66.) Indeed, he claims, "If we wanted to define culture more sharply, we would say that the value system is the most important element in a culture," 37.

> the term. We say <u>community</u> here not so much to point to the feelings of fellowship and solidarity, but to designate the group's formal structure or the ways these people are brought together.[18]

This series of definitions presents six elements that form a description of community: relationship, a sense of belonging, mutual support, a sense of commonality, solidarity, and a formal structure of relationship.

<u>Relationship</u>. The community is an institution or group of persons that is characterized by the development and nurturing of relationship. Communities are constituted by a series of interactive, enduring relationships. Isolation and solitude are inconsistent with community because the nature of communities is to foster interpersonal relationships that help form persons' identities.

Both Gadamer and Groome discuss the relational quality of <u>praxis</u>. Gadamer's intersubjective hermeneutic is based on developing positive relationships within the community. Groome also assumes the existence of communities of faith that promote sharing, open, loving relationships. Community cannot exist without the presence of relationships that allow for persons to be informed, accepted, and encouraged to grow.

Charles Foster claims relationships are basic to the human experience.[19] George Herbert Mead's influential work on the social self has made the convincing case that individuals

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[18]Whitehead and Whitehead, <u>Community of Faith</u>, 24.

[19]Charles R. Foster, <u>Teaching in the Community of Faith</u> (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 34.

only develop personhood within social relationships.[20] The

importance of relationships is reflected in the work of H.

Richard Niebuhr, especially in Radical Monotheism and Western

Culture:

> The theory of value I am seeking to present is through and
> through social; I know of no self-relatedness apart from
> other-relatedness or self-alienation apart from alienation
> from the other.[21]

It is through our relationships with others that we become.

We are creatures who develop through our interactions with

other persons in a reflexive relationship of sharing and give-

and-take.

A Sense of belonging. Communities are places where

persons can be encouraged to feel that they belong. They can

feel at home, accepted, worthwhile, and affirmed. Communities

may incorporate persons into their membership and world-view.

They can make persons feel that the values, perspectives, and

lifestyles that compose the community affirm the worth of each

individual.

Persons who have been socialized or enculturated into a

community know that what is experienced within the community

affects them. They can recognize the influence that the

beliefs, practices, and values that are characteristic of the

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[20]George Herbert Mead, Mind, Self, and Society: From the
Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist (Chicago: University of
Chicago Press, 1934.)

[21]H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Center of Value," in Radical
Monotheism and Western Culture (New York: Harper & Row, 1960),
105, note 1.

community have on their own beliefs, practices, and values. This does not require uniformity; persons within communities remain individuals. However, persons within communities tend to be influenced by the world-view of the community.

Community can support the individual. A well-functioning community does not ignore the persons within it. Instead, it supports the rights of each person within the community. A community provides services to undergird the work of its members. It supports those who are experiencing difficulty. It supports the lifestyle that characterizes its members. It gives support to individuals and groups within its membership.

Commonality. The word community is linguistically related to two other key terms: common and communication. In order for community to exist and have staying power (or what Nelson calls endurance), its members must hold much in common with each other. Although a community does not need to be homogeneous, the people need to hold some common values, objects of devotion, and loyalty.

Communication is also crucial to the functioning of a community. Dialogue requires more than the sharing of information. In order to engage in dialogue, both partners must have a common language, a common history, and a common respect for each other and openness to the emergence of something new from the event of communication.

Solidarity. Whitehead and Whitehead use the term solidarity as a statement of belonging, support, and

commonality.[22] Gadamer also describes his understanding of community in terms of solidarity.[23] Solidarity implies commitment to the other, respect, openness, the kind of knowing that characterizes communities in which persons are taken to be meaningful and valued. Solidarity does not assume uniformity, nor does it require that each individual give up her or his identity. Instead, solidarity requires sharing and caring.

A Formal structure of relationship. The preceding definitions of community have focused on the psychological states that are conducive to creating a sense of community. Whitehead and Whitehead also claim that a formal structure characterizes communities.[24]

In this sense, communities are patterned forms of group interaction.[25] They exist because there is some regularity in the ways they provide occasions for interaction. Communities do not exist when behavior is haphazard; a community has

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[22]Whitehead and Whitehead, _Community of Faith_, 24.

[23]Gadamer, "What Is Practice?" 87; here, Gadamer claims solidarity is part and parcel of the way persons think and act with a sense of a specific bond between them. "Practice," he states, "is conducting oneself and acting in solidarity. Solidarity, however, is the decisive condition and basis of all social reason."

[24]Whitehead and Whitehead, 25, state that the book focuses on the structural definition of community, instead of the psychological.

[25]Ibid., 26. They claim community is an intermediate social form that falls midway on the continuum between primary group and formal association.

shared standards of behavior to which the people have consciously or unconsciously agreed.

Implications About Community From Gadamer

Richard Bernstein mentions a number of assumptions about community implicit, if not occasionally explicit, in Gadamer's hermeneutic. Several of these implications about community are discussed in Chapter 3. First, as suggested earlier, a well-functioning community would include solidarity. Second, a common bond would exist between persons. Third, an attitude of mutuality, respect, and active, intentional listening would exist. Fourth, a sense of openness that is willing to risk and make oneself vulnerable would prevail. This openness would require a relationship of trust. And fifth, persons within a well-functioning community must be willing to test opinions and ideas through encounter with the other.[26] Gadamer is skeptical of engineering such communities. Instead, he seems to assume that these qualities exist in communities that are informed by phronēsis.

Gadamer's suggestions seem appropriate as descriptions of the ways small communities conduct themselves. While his ideal of the community of solidarity may be a bit naive and optimistic when discussed on the grand scale of an entire society, it may be a realistic goal for the congregation.

Communities are characterized by mutuality. A community functions best when its members relate to each other by means

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[26]Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, 161-62.

of mutual exchange and reciprocal relationships. Dialogue within a community occurs between equal partners who share a common subject matter. In dialogue, each partner is mutually defined in the exchange. Neither dominates the other. Reciprocity between persons in the community fosters the sense of commonality and solidarity.

<u>Communities are characterized by respect</u>. A community cannot exist without common respect for fellow members of the community. Respect signifies valuing the other as worthwhile and important to the community. Showing other persons respect involves deferring to the needs of the other, instead of insisting on one's own way. Within comunity, persons regard each other positively.

<u>Persons within community listen actively</u>. Gadamer emphasizes intense and intentional listening among the members of a community. Listening is not as much a function of physical condition and physiological factors as it is of the will. Persons have to <u>intend</u> to listen. Listening means anticipating that what the other says might be important. When persons listen, they expect the other to say something that might contribute to the emergence of meaning.

Intentional listening requires a reciprocal relationship. Gadamer describes three possible relationships between persons in conversation with each other. First, an I-It relationship, is one in which the subject considers the other an object to be observed, analyzed, and scientifically investigated.

Second, one type of an I-Thou relationship, is one in which one considers the other as a fellow subject, but refuses to listen to what the other says as something that might impact one's own perspective or horizon. And third, another type of I-Thou relationship, is one in which each subject enters into a reciprocal affiliation, and assumes that what the other has to say may actually be <u>true</u>.[27]

Maria Harris discusses the importance of listening as one of the movements of her first step in the dance she calls Christian religious education.[28] The first step in her approach is the step of silence. The initial process in this step is a reflective kind of listening which recognizes the ways the voices of women have been silenced. Harris claims, "Listening as a consciously chosen task enables us to hear and to realize that curriculum is silent not only about women, but about most of the world's peoples--women, men, and children--who are without political power."[29] Listening means expecting to hear voices that have been silenced, as well as listening to the common voices of the world.

<u>Openness</u>. Persons within community need to be open to the strange as well as to the familiar if community is to be effective. Persons within community need to risk the

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[27]Gadamer, <u>Truth and Method</u>, 321-25. See also Wright, 198-202.

[28]Harris, <u>Teaching and Religious Imagination</u>, 101-4.

[29]Ibid., 103.

possibility that what another says may be meaningful and may, therefore, challenge one's prejudices. When one is open, he or she expects that the relationship with others will contribute to greater understanding of reality. When one opens oneself to others, one becomes vulnerable to the knowledge one may gain in the dialogue with another. Openness requires trust, confidence, respect, and solidarity.

Encounter With Others. Individuals in community have an opportunity to test their opinions and ideas against the measure of others. Critical thinking involves more than developed mental activity. It also requires the dimension of recognizing the way others react to one's ideas. Critical thinking is reflective. Critical thinking means persons reflect on their own actions, but also on the reactions others have to their actions.[30]

The Congregation as Faith Community

The Christian congregation is a community in which persons share the values of the Christian faith. Charles Foster states that a community of faith is "a people whose

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[30]W. Alan Smith, "Feedback," Harper's Encyclopedia of Religious Education, eds. Iris V. Cully and Kendig Brubaker Cully (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 257, suggests that feedback is reciprocal response to a message from another that indicates to the sender that the message has been received. Feedback also gives clues to the original sender of the message about the reaction, acceptance, and evaluation of the message. This information becomes part of the next message delivered. H. Richard Niebuhr, The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 63-64, suggests the term "accountability" for this reciprocity.

corporate as well as personal identities are to be found in their relationship to some significant past event."[31] Foster identifies several elements of the faith community that form the basis of a description of the Christian congregation as a faith community.

The Formative Event Is a Response to the Christ Event

Persons learn what it means to be a part of the Christian congregation as a community of faith through relationships with others who have been informed and formed by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.[32] The author has suggested that children learn what it means to be a part of the community of faith by being with significant others who experience the faith as an important part of their own identities.[33] The community of faith celebrates its historical linkage to the shared stories of the faith, to the ancestors in the faith, and to the liturgical re-enactment of the church's experience of God's continuing presence.

Foster suggests that persons learn how to reflect upon their present experience in the faith community. He also claims that one major function of the faith community is to make persons aware that they are related to a historical

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[31]Charles Foster, "The Faith Community as a Guiding Image for Christian Education," Contemporary Approaches to Christian Education, eds. Jack L. Seymour and Donald E. Miller (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), 54.

[32]Ibid., 55.

[33]W. Alan Smith, Children Belong in Worship! A Guide to the Children's Sermon (St. Louis: CBP Press, 1984), 42-43.

community.[34] Likewise, Groome claims that the Christian community of faith can be the context in which persons experience the significance of the shared Christian Story. Groome does not believe one can experience and critically reflect upon the Story unless he or she is engaged in the community of faith.

The congregation is, therefore, the location in which the historical witness of the universal church through time becomes present in the experience of the individual. Mary Elizabeth Moore says the radical claim of her book, "is that the community must recognize how deeply connected it is through time and across the globe."[35] The congregation as the community of faith is one institution in which persons may become connected with the roots of the faith through a shared experience with others within the community. Hopewell describes the congregation as, "the primary community by which faith is expressed and perpetuated."[36]

Corporate Identity Is Relational

The corporate identity of persons within the Christian community, "is caught up in institutional structures, customs, and kinship networks. It bonds persons into relationships across time and space."[37] Both Gadamer and Groome emphasize

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[34]Foster, Teaching in the Community of Faith, 31.

[35]Moore, Education for Continuity and Change, 22.

[36]Hopewell, Congregation, 14.

[37]Foster, "Faith Community," 56.

the relational dimensions of dialogical, <u>praxis</u>-based communities. Persons are, by nature, social creatures. Foster claims relationships are basic to the human experience. One aspect of this relationship is the development of bonding between the members of the community. Maria Harris has emphasized the same theme.[38]

Moore identifies one intention of her traditioning model of Christian religious education as:

> enhancing the interactive relationship individuals have within themselves and with their environment. Persons are by nature related: they are internally related to God, to other persons, and to the world. These relationships become part of persons' experience and enter into their personal decision and transformation. The depth and richness of these relationships, then, is very important.[39]

The congregation provides one of the best opportunities to develop the kinds of relationships that create healthy communities. The congregation can take advantage of many occasions in its corporate life to foster an interactive, relational environment in which persons can experience healthy community.

The Spontaneous Nature of Community

Foster says a third source of the community of faith is more spontaneous in nature:

> A third source for the corporate nature of the community

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[38]Harris, <u>Teaching and Religious Imagination</u>, 110-13. She makes the significant suggestion that the task of religious education is characterized by the kind of bonding found within intimate relationships between women. This kind of bonding is a "fully human and fully adult possibility," 112.

[39]Moore, <u>Education for Continuity and Change</u>, 138.

of faith may be found in people's spontaneous and immediate responses to the initiative of God that breaks in upon the obvious structures of our common life, filling them with hope, new meaning, and power.[40]

The congregation is one place in which the community may experience the presence of God in situations that are out of the ordinary. Foster quotes Victor Turner's discussion of spontaneity in the community of faith as a "moment in and out of time."[41]

Spontaneity is certainly not limited to the congregation, nor is every congregational setting open enough to foster the kind of spontaneous appreciation of God's playful intervention into history that Foster suggests. Nevertheless, the congregation provides perhaps the most likely setting within which the spontaneous dimension of community may be recognized and acted upon. Spontaneity can never be created, only celebrated.

A Tentative Definition of the Congregation As Community

James Hopewell defines the congregation as, "a group that possesses a special name and recognized members who assemble regularly to celebrate a more universally practiced worship but who communicate with each other sufficiently to develop intrinsic patterns of conduct, outlook, and story."[42] His definition is accurate, but fails to give adequate attention

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[40]Foster, Teaching in the Community of Faith, 39.

[41]Ibid.

[42]Hopewell, Congregation, 12-13.

to either the influence of the past or the psychological dimensions of the community discussed previously.

A tentative definition of the congregation as a community of faith builds upon Hopewell's suggestion. <u>The congregation is a community of persons with a shared identity, informed by a historical faith, in which persons participate in a dialectical relationship between their own experience in the immediate communities around them and the claim to truth offered by the Bible</u>. The congregation as community is characterized by a sense of solidarity among its members, a common intimate bond, a sense of mutuality, respect, and openness, a commitment to active listening, a sense of belonging, an expectation of support, a feeling of commonality, and specific structures by which all of this is put into action. While the structural dimension of the congregation is important, the congregation is more effectively characterized by the psychological elements in the list.

The congregation is a community that engages in two parallel forms of hermeneutics. The congregation engages in a hermeneutical relationship with the Bible that allows the Bible and its interpreters to be equal partners in a dialogue centered on the Word of God. At the same time, the congregation is engaged in a hermeneutic that establishes a dialogue between the life experience of its members and the larger sociopolitical situation of the neighborhood in which

it is located. Chapter 8 addresses the issues related to the congregation as a hermeneutical community.

CHAPTER 8

The Congregation As A Hermeneutical Community

The congregation as a hermeneutical community is a community that interprets its experience, the biblical text, and the situation of the larger community in which it is located. Chapter 8 is divided into three major sections. The first section examines the hermeneutical issues in the congregation's use of the Bible. Four issues are examined: a dialectical/ dialogical approach to the Bible, an understanding of the disclosure that takes place between the Bible and its interpreters, intersubjective biblical interpretation, and a partnership between the Bible and its interpreters. The second section uses the same four issues to examine the hermeneutical relationship between the congregation and its socioeconomic and geographical setting. The chapter concludes with a description of the dialectic between these two moments of the interpretation.

The Bible in the Hermeneutical Community

The Christian congregation has been defined by its use of the Bible throughout its history. The understanding of <u>how</u> to use the Bible, indeed of the <u>nature</u> of the Bible, has been a major topic of debate. However, in every era of the church's history persons have understood the Bible as the church's book.[1]

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[1]Willi Marxsen, <u>The New Testament as the Church's Book</u>, trans. James E. Mignard (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 12-13, states, "The New Testament as the church's book is thus

Gadamer and Groome both suggest that the Bible must be interpreted in order to be understood. The church does not have the Bible in a hermetically sealed case which emanates absolute and perfectly understandable truth in all sitautions and for all persons. Understanding the Bible always involves interpreting the Bible. The congregation as a hermeneutical community must, therefore, develop a hermeneutic for the Bible that establishes the relationship between the Bible and its interpreters.

A Dialectical Relationship

The congregation approaches the Bible in a dialectical/dialogical way. If the text of the Bible is one pole in the dialectic and the interpreter is the other pole, the hermeneutic of Christian religious education would focus on the process of interaction <u>between</u> these poles more than on the activity of either partner in the relationship. The dialectical event is a dynamic conversation between the partners in the dialogue.

The Bible and the interpreter are both affected by the act of interpretation. An element of self-interpretation exists in every act of interpreting a text, especially a

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the book from which the church sustains its life, as it finds there its source for preaching, doctrine, order, and teaching." He also claims the New Testament is the creation <u>of</u> the church. Marxsen, a New Testament scholar, needlessly downplays the significance of the Old Testament for the Christian faith.

classic text like the Bible.[2] The Bible is changed as well. Every encounter with the same text from the Bible requires re-entering the hermeneutical process, because in every encounter with the text, the situation of the interpreter has changed. Each act of interpretation assumes the previous encounter and dialogue as the starting point of the conversation. But each encounter also involves new questions that the text asks of the interpreter and new responses the interpreter must give if she or he is to remain faithful to present experience.

The Bible challenges the assumptions and prejudices of the modern world in each dialogue with its interpreters. The experience of interpretation moves back and forth, to-and-fro along the surface of the text in an ever-growing, ever more critical set of questions about the meaning in the text and the meaning of one's experience.

The dialectical nature of biblical interpretation means that the congregation needs to take seriously the encounter between the Bible and those who interpret it. The dialectical encounter with the biblical text is a complex interaction between partners. Groome and Gadamer both offer clues to understanding this encounter in creative ways.

As discussed earlier, Groome suggests that shared praxis begins with the present action of persons within the faith community. He claims that the first agenda of biblical study is to help make persons aware of their experience in relation

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[2]Gadamer, Truth and Method, 257.

to a particular subject matter, although he is less clear about who determines the choice of subject matter and how.[3] After the personal stories have been shared and discussed critically, he introduces the Christian Story, and has the educator lead a presentation of this Story to the learners. The final two movements of his approach are characterized by dialectical encounter and dialogue between the community's Story and Vision and the individual stories and visions that have been shared previously.[4]

Gadamer describes praxis as the dialectical encounter and interaction between partners in a dialogical relationship. Gadamer claims that meaning does not reside in a text in an absolute sense. The encounter between the prejudice of the text and the prejudice of its interpreters produces a relationship of play in which meaning for here-and-now emerges. Each new act of interpretation results in the birth of new meaning. No two hermeneutical experiences can result in exactly the same interpretation; there are no absolutely correct answers, only inevitable questions.

The congregation as a hermeneutical community needs to

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[3]One of the significant differences between Groome's praxis and Freire's is that Groome portrays the educator in a much more active, almost aggressive role in relation to the learner. Here, for instance, it seems apparent the topic of discussion is introduced by the educator. Freire determines the themes to be addressed by the community as a result of his interaction with the community.

[4]See the author's discussion of Groome's approach in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

develop its understanding of the Bible in several areas. Three elements of relationship with the Bible deserve mention. First, the congregation needs to identify its prejudices toward the Bible before it can interpret the text. Second, the congregation needs to identify distinctive elements within the text. And third, the congregation needs to engage in critical reflection on both the text and its own experience.

Identification of prejudices. Gadamer and Groome both assert that the first act in interpretation is to identify the previous history persons have with the text or the subject matter of discussion. Maria Harris makes essentially the same point, insisting that the first action of critical pedagogy is giving voice to those whose voices have been silenced.[5] The first step in developing a congregation as a hermeneutical community is to assist persons in telling what they already know about a given biblical text, about an experience of personal oppression, about a situation of concern to the community at large.

One of the most helpful claims Gadamer makes is that prejudices are the biases of our openness to the world.[6] No one can know the world or give voice to one's experience without prejudices. At the same time, some prejudices block our ability to understand a text like the Bible. Consequently,

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[5]See also Maria Harris' discussion, especially 96-116, in which the steps of her dance take on the flavor of liberation and emancipation.

[6]Gadamer, Philosophical Hermeneutics, 9.

the first responsibility of an intersubjective <u>praxis</u> model is for the congregation to foster a free sharing of one's prejudices, prejudgments, and prior understandings of the texts <u>before</u> engaging in critical interpretation.

A study of the healing of the paralytic (Matthew 9:1-8; Mark 2:1-12; Luke 5:17-26) might begin by inviting the group to paraphrase the story. The paraphrase will likely be a composite picture of all three gospel stories. The group might then be asked to identify what the major issues in the story seem to be. Only after the group has shared its prior understanding of the story is it possible to study what each version of the story says. Many persons who have been raised in the influence of the church (whether as an active participant in a congregation or not) have a composite gospel tucked away in their memories. They would be unaware of the different emphases Matthew, Mark, and Luke place on the basic elements in the story. Beginning the hermeneutical enterprise by identifying prejudices related to the story allows the participants to name freely what they already know about the text. They also find out what they do <u>not</u> know, but thought they did!

<u>Distinctive elements in the text</u>. Walter Wink offers a significant approach to biblical study.[7] Using the story of the healing of the paralytic, Wink leads the student through

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[7]Walter Wink, <u>The Bible in Human Transformation: Toward a New Paradigm for Biblical Study</u> (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973).

a series of ever more critical questions about the action of the text. He moves from historical-critical questions, to questions about the motivations of its characters, to questions about personal identification with each of the characters in turn.

Each movement of his study attempts to move the participants to identify distinctive elements within the story. First, the historical-critical questions lead the participants to identify the similarities and differences among the three versions of the story. The second level of questions help the participants identify the four major characters in the story and invite them to speculate about the motivations each character might have. The final level of questions asks the participants to identify ways in which they act like each of the characters.

The underlying purpose behind Wink's approach is to move from merely objective forms of interpretation and to begin asking questions about the significance of the text for the way one lives one's faith. His questions and three levels of questioning are influenced by his grounding in Jungian psychology as well as his training as a biblical scholar.

Critical reflection on text and experience. Two more steps, added to Wink's method, seem to make the process more dialectical as well as more transformative. The first is to ask the participants to identify three to five specific actions they feel they must take as a result of their self-

discovery through the Bible study. The second is to identify who the paralyzed, voiceless, and powerless persons are in one's community and begin the process of planning how the congregation can help meet their needs.

The dialectical element in this approach to the biblical text is that there is a constant interaction between the claims of the text and the experience of its interpreters. There is a movement between the subjects of the dialogue that is constantly under the direction and empowered by the subject matter of the text. And every new element in the interpretation leads the interpreter deeper into the meaning that will emerge from the encounter and into increased self-understanding.

Disclosure of Meaning

Neither Groome nor Gadamer would feel comfortable with any of the alternative ways of using the Bible described in the Introduction.[8] The historical-critical approach to the Bible assumes that, with the correct application of method, the scholar can determine the meaning in the text. In this approach, the scholar is the active agent determining meaning lodged in the passive and, ultimately voiceless, text. Another form of objectivism, most frequently identified as a fundamentalist approach claims the truth and meaning of the

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[8]Groome, Christian Religious Education, 208, claims the educator should make use of the best of current biblical scholarship during the third step of his approach. However, he would not be willing to limit the use of the Bible to the method of historical criticism.

text have already been determined, once and for all, by the voice of God that placed the words in the text. All one must do is read the text to discover God's will and hear the Word of God. Here, the text is the subject, imposing its will upon the reader, as object of God's will.

Both approaches assume the question of meaning has been closed and absolutized in the particular form we know as the Bible. The question of meaning has been settled. It is contained in the received text and may, therefore, be discovered once the proper method or attitude of reverence has been found.

Gadamer's hermeneutic is a hermeneutic of disclosure, not closure. Gadamer claims that no absolute truth or meaning is contained within the text. Instead, meaning emerges from the dialectical encounter with the text. Truth is always out in front of the text, leading the interpreter into deeper and deeper encounter with the text in the direction it points. He cannot understand persons who insist on the existence of absolute, crystallized meaning for a text. The only truth is truth relative to the situation in which interpretation arises. Meaning is always meaning for here-and-now.[9]

Groome claims that a praxis understanding of Christian religious education is always oriented toward dialectical encounter among the past, the present, and the future. A

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[9]See Bernstein's summary phrase, "what is feasible, what is possible, what is correct, here and now," in Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, 158.

shared Christian _praxis_ approach is always oriented toward the discovery of new actions to be taken as a result of the shared _praxis_. Groome is absolutely against any attempt to use the Bible (or any other aspect cf the Story) in a dogmatic, closure way. This is especially evident in the article he co-authored with Mary Boys, in which he says that encounter with the Bible asks two separate, but intimately related questions: "what is the Bible we carry?" and "who are we who carry it?"[10] For members of the Christian community of faith, knowledge of the nature and purpose of the Bible necessarily engages one in questions about the nature and purpose of her or his own existence.

Personal encounter with the Bible provides the occasion within which meaning and truth for the situation of the congregation may emerge. The Bible does not provide hard and fast rules and dogmatic pronouncements. The typical prophetic utterance, "Thus says the Lord," does not mean, "Thus says the Lord, and that settles it." It means, "Thus the Lord says _now_, and thus the Lord continues to say. Enter into a relationship with God wherein you may determine not only what God _has_ said, but also what God is saying here and now."

Reading the Bible as a disclosure of the Word of God is necessarily contextual. The encounter of dialogue with the text produces meaning that fits the circumstances of the current occasion of interpretation. When one preaches, it is

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[10]Boys and Groome, "Principles and Pedagogy," 487.

difficult to use old sermons over again. Each sermon requires one to approach the same texts from the context of new personal experience. The situation of the congregation has changed, the world has changed. Consequently, interpretation of the text must also change.

The Bible discloses the meaning of its subject matter as a revelation. Meaning only emerges when one allows oneself to enter the hermeneutical event expectantly and openly, trusting that whatever emerges will be directed toward greater emancipation of persons and better relationship with God. The Bible discloses meaning through the application of imagination, not method. Freire says that true dialogue is loving, humble, and trusting.[11] This implies that the congregation as a hermeneutical community has as one of its central tasks the promotion of communities of love, humility, trust, openness, expectation, and transformation. The Bible can be encountered as a disclosive partner in dialogue only in such a setting.

Intersubjective Encounter With the Bible

One of Gadamer's great contributions has been his suggestion that the relationship between the text and its interpreters is intersubjective. He claims hermeneutics is like a dialogue between subjects.

Groome also presents a model in which the Bible becomes

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[11]R.H. Cram and H.C. Simmons, "Communication Theory," in Harper's Encyclopedia of Religious Education, 143-44.

a part of the present experience of its interpreters. The text is not locked in some inaccessible past. Mary Elizabeth Moore is most appreciative of Groome's approach because of his insistence that the intersubjective encounter between text and interpreter necessarily leads out toward the future and has implications for both examination of new actions and of the encounter with the emerging Reign of God.[12]

The issue of intersubjectivity has numerous implications for the congregation as a hermeneutical community. Two implications stand out. First, intersubjectivity means that neither subject dominates the other. And second, intersubjectivity means both subjects have a claim to truth.

Neither subject is dominant. Gadamer and Groome claim that intersubjectivity means that neither the Bible nor the interpreter is the dominant or authoritarian force in the relationship. The hermeneutical dialectic with the Bible is like the second of Gadamer's I-Thou relationships. Each partner in the dialogue listens intently to the message presented by the other. Each assumes the message of the other might have implications for the way he or she will look at and live in the world. This attitude toward the Bible means that persons in the congregation as a hermeneutical community read the Bible expecting it to make a claim upon the way they read

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[12]Moore, Education for Continuity and Change, 53; see also ibid., 48: "The community's story and vision serve as a critique of persons' present experience in light of the community's tradition and may lead to its revision."

the world. They read and interpret the Bible in a way analogous to a conversation with a close, intimate friend.

Both subjects have a claim to truth. Many persons have suggested the Bible makes claims to truth upon us. Many others have said the scientific method makes claims upon the Bible. But few have stated as clearly as Gadamer how these two opposing sets of claims are caught in a pattern of interaction, a to-and-fro play of meaning and understanding. Gadamer and Groome understand the relationship between the Bible and its interpreters as intersubjective and dialectical. This means that both subjects can legitimately claim that what they say about the subject at hand is the truth. Neither has the absolute truth; both claim some measure of truth as they engage in dialogue.

A Relationship Between Partners

The congregation as hermeneutical community understands the relationship with the Bible as a relationship between partners. The implication of partnership is that those who engage in hermeneutics have established a covenantal relationship with each other. The persons within a hermeneutical community enter into a covenantal agreement with the biblical material in which each party has an equal share in the proceeds of the partnership.

The congregation can develop a way of relating to the Bible as a partner with whom one shares in a common goal of understanding. Both the text and its interpreter are formed

out of the interaction between the two partners. Neither subject has more of a claim to the truth than the other; both subjects present a claim to truth. Truth is not an essence that is attainable through coercion, proper method, or prayer alone. Truth emerges out of the sincere sharing of the two partners in the dialogue. Once persons begin to understand the Bible as a partner in a dialogue, they will be able to read the text as a companion in the journey of faith, instead of an absolute monarch dictating one's beliefs, behavior, and biography.

A Hermeneutical Relationship With the Community

The congregation as a hermeneutical community also interprets its "situatedness" in the larger community around it. The members of many congregations give the appearance they have been inoculated against the sins of the deteriorating neighborhood around their church building. The congregation cannot exist as an intellectual and spiritual oasis in the midst of a troubled city or an isolated farming community. If it is a dialectically-formed and transformative community of faith, it must also take seriously the situation of the immediate neighborhood in which it is located.

A model of Christian religious education that is truly dialectical will not be able to remain neutral on sociopolitical, economic, or justice issues. The essential claim in the hermeneutics of Gadamer and Groome is that dialogue with the text always asks hard questions about one's

actions in the world. Freire claims the church must be prophetic. He further claims every action of education must increase the humanization of the people, or else it is anti-dialogical instead of dialogical.[13]

A Dialectical Relationship With the Community

The congregation as a hermeneutical community engages in reflective action in the shared life of the congregation. At the same time, the congregation interacts with the situations of mistrust, dehumanization, pain, and suffering in the larger community. A dialectical encounter with the texts of the Christian faith cannot remain introspective. The Bible raises questions about one's understanding of the entire world, not just about the nature of the church and personal faith.

The congregation needs to immerse itself in the life of its immediate community. The kinds of questions it needs to ask are, "What is the situation of the persons who live within our neighborhood?" "What is going on around us?" "What are the needs of the persons who come past our doors daily?" The congregation is not expected to minister to the needs of the community out of an exaggerated sense of duty, but is led to a commitment to the humanization of its world through engagement in the suffering of the people.

Freire's method is not that of an outside expert who comes into a community with ready made solutions developed by educational experts. Instead, he and his team move into the

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[13]Freire, "Education, Liberation, and the Church," 15.

communities with whom they consult and spend months observing the life of the community. The pedagogy they develop is developed for the needs and situation of <u>that</u> community and that community alone.[14] No universal pedagogy can be applied in every situation. Instead, each literacy program is unique, because each arises out of Freire's relationship with the people of the community.

<u>An Example of the congregation as a hermeneutical community: a description</u>. The congregation needs to think of itself as an agent for transformation of the situation of the larger community surrounding it. One example would be the First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Pomona, California. This large congregation is housed in an impressive physical plant situated between the Pomona Valley Regional Hospital and the Los Angeles County Fairgrounds. The members of the congregation are highly educated and professional, with a large number of retired persons, including several retired ministers and/or their spouses. The members live in relatively affluent suburbs of Pomona, including several who live in retirement communities in Claremont.

The immediate neighborhood around the church facilities has a very different personality. Directly across the street is a retirement facility that is not as affluent as those in

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[14]Compare his descriptions of his work with the emerging African nation of Guinea-Bissau (Paulo Freire, <u>Pedagogy in Process: The Letters to Guinea-Bissau</u> [New York: Seabury/Continuum, 1978]) and of his native Brazil (<u>Education for Critical Consciousness</u>).

which the congregation's members live. The residents of the neighboring facility are predominantly skilled care residents, needing constant supervision and nursing facilities. The housing in the neighborhood is lower middle-class to lower class in nature, with a large variation evident in the amount of care persons give to their property. There is a large transient population in the vicinity of the Fairgrounds, primarily composed of persons who travel in association with fair and carnival industries. Crime is a major problem in the area, prompting the staff of the church to keep the facilities locked and gated at all times, admitting only those who have been properly identified. The immediate neighborhood is bordered by another neighborhood that is a known center of trade in cocaine and other drugs. To the south of the church's neighborhood is the location of one of Pomona's Hispanic gangs; to the east is one of the African American gangs; to the southeast is the headquarters of the predominant Asian gang. There is also a strong and ever-increasing presence of Pomona's homeless population centering in the immediate neighborhood.

An Example of the congregation as a hermeneutical community: an interpretation. The differences between the population of the congregation and the population of the neighborhood in which it is set are striking. This congregation has the opportunity to engage in a hermeneutical relationship with its neighborhood. This relationship is

dialectial in the sense that it is constantly engaged in a dialogue between its understanding of its own experience as a community of faith and its need to work out that faith in ways that transform situations of suffering and dehumanization.

The congregation provides several services that address needs of the larger community. It has provided office space, free of rent and utility charges, to the Pomona Valley Council of Churches and its social action agencies. One portion of that support has been the provision of a house on the churh property, formerly used by Scout troops sponsored by the congregation, as temporary housing for the homeless. This housing is administered by the PVCC. This administration does not currently involve any members of the congregation.

One of the former pastors of the congregation was instrumental in founding the Greater Pomona Housing Development Corporation, which he still heads. This agency provides low-cost housing for the needs of the community. Several of the congregation's members are involved in a variety of service organizations, such as the hospital auxiliary at the Pomona Valley Regional Hospital, the Red Cross, the Heart Association, etc.

The question is whether the entire congregation has entered into its community in a dialectical fashion. To what extent have they affected the situations of dehumanization around them, and to what extent have they had their

understanding of the world affected by their interaction with the community? At present, the congregation's response to the situation of its neighborhood is conducted through its representatives: the ministerial staff and the outreach efforts of the ecumenical partners supported by the congregation and its budget.

In terms of Freire's descriptions of types of churches, the congregation would be an example of the modernizing church which, he claims, "alienate [the oppressed social classes]...: by defending the reforms that maintain the status quo."[15] The congregation does not engage in a dialectical relationship with the neighborhood; there seems to be little effort made on the part of the congregation's members to learn from the neighborhood or to particpate with the neighbors in their liberation.

The Disclosure of Meaning

Gadamer's intersubjective understanding of praxis and Freire's critical pedagogy are most similar in the claim that meaning is not imported from another culture or another horizon and then handed over as the truth that must be accepted. Instead, meaning is disclosed in the dialectical encounter between persons who open themselves to each other.

The congregation that opens itself to the situation of the community that surrounds it will not be effective if it attempts to import curriculum resources or crystallized

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[15]Freire, "Education, Liberation and the Church," 12.

projects from a group of experts and then apply these to the situation of the dehumanized. Such attempts are patronizing, oppressive, and anti-dialogical. Gadamer believes effective interpretation of text or event allows the meaning of the subject matter to emerge out of the openness the partners have to the disclosure of truth. The congregation needs to enter into the kind of relationship with its neighborhood that allows this kind of disclosure. This means, first of all, that the congregation's members must see the persons in their neighborhood as partners.

The congregation which immerses itself in the experience of its surrounding community cannot impose its methods on the needs of the community. Instead, it must engage in active reflection and reflective action along with, not over against the people. It must allow the specific issues confronting the people in the community to emerge out of their intimate participation in the experience of the people instead of coming to the situation with pre-conceived approaches and answers. The descriptions of the hermeneutical attitude found in Gadamer, Freire, and Groome could serve as descriptions of the ways the congregation needs to be with the community, so that, together, they may become fully human and fully responsive to the grace of God. The approaches the congregation uses need to arise out of the dialectical relationship it establishes with the larger community as God discloses the truth and meaning for this situation.

Intersubjectivity and Ministry With "Those People"

Many congregations are similar to the situation at First Christian, Pomona. The discrepancy between the social status of the persons of the congregation and that of its neighbors is great. There is discomfort when, following the service of worship, the pastor of an urban congregation shakes hands with well-dressed parishioners and is approached by a filthy, unkempt, obviously intoxicated man. Feelings of embarrassment, guilt, and uncertainty accompany such an encounter.

The congregation needs to address the situation of "those people" as well as its own people. The ministry of the congregation is intersubjective. That means that persons will assume that others are persons of worth, that they are due the same respect as oneself, and that they may have something important to say about the meaning of life and our place in it, whether or not they have a home and fine clothes.

Intersubjectivity means Christian religious education does not teach content; it teaches persons. It is oriented toward the specific situation of individuals, not just the overall situation of the community at large. The congregation that recognizes the intersubjective nature of its task will look at the needs of the community as _personal_ needs, not _institutional_ needs. While engaging in transformative efforts to correct systemic problems of the area, the congregation will also help in the one-on-one, person-to-person alleviation of suffering.

This orientation toward social action arises from more than guilt or pity. It emerges from an ongoing commitment to reflective action and active reflection on praxis. It must begin with identification and critical reflection on present experience with those who are suffering. But it must also bring that reflection toward the resolution of the situation of dehumanization and domination. Reflection that ends with hand-wringing and cries of, "What can we do for those people?" is not critical reflection. Every reflective act must also result in new action and new reflection on that action.

The congregation must begin to act reflectively in the lives of persons. It must begin to deal with those who are homeless as persons of worth, persons of significance, persons of dignity. Freire rejects the efforts of liberals, who act from a distance by throwing money at a problem instead of engaging in revolutionary praxis to help persons change their situations of oppression.[16] The congregation that engages in hermeneutical reflection on the community that surrounds it cannot simply talk about the conditions in its community; it must involve itself in dialectical action to change that situation. As Freire claims, "consciousness is not changed by lessons, lectures and eloquent sermons but by the action of human beings in the world."[17]

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[16]See Freire, "Education, Liberation and the Church," especially 12- 15.

[17]Ibid., 2.

Partnership With the Outcast

The congregation needs to enter into action in solidarity with the people of the community. This involves entering into partnership with the outcast to work together toward the alleviation of suffering. Social programs that give aid to the poor can be as patronizing and dehumanizing as situations of slavery and oppression. The banking method of education assumes that persons need to be given all knowledge by the expert teacher. This assumption devalues the student while exalting the teacher, and results in a master/slave dialectic that constantly reinforces the oppressive interaction between these persons. One of the most frequent criticisms of the nation's welfare system has been the dehumanizing effect of telling persons they will be given the necessities of life. The clear implication in many entitlement programs has been, we _have_ to give you this, because you are too stupid, too lazy, and too inferior to get it for yourself.

The congregation as a hermeneutical community enters into partnership with persons within the community, instead of entering the environment of the community with a hand-out. The partnership works with others to dialogically develop a shared analysis of the situation, to critically evaluate methods of meeting the problem, and to construct the mechanisms for meeting those needs together. The congregation does not impose its own plan of action upon the situation of the people, but enters into the relationship with members of the community as

a partner. The intent of the congregation as a hermeneutical community is to help empower the community to reach a common decision about appropriate actions to alleviate its own situation.

A Dialectic Between Dialectics

At the end of Chapter 7, the author suggested a tentative definition of the congregation as a community: "The congregation is a community of persons with a shared identity, informed by a historical faith, in which persons participate in a dialectical relationship between their own experience in the immediate communities around them and the claim to truth offered by the Bible."[18] The congregation as a hermeneutical community is characterized by a dialectic between an intersubjective encounter with the Bible and the kind of critical, transformative pedagogy suggested by Groome and Freire. Part I of the dissertation describes the dialectical nature of intersubjective hermeneutics with the Bible. Part II also suggests Groome's shared Christian praxis is dialectical in nature. The congregation as a hermeneutical community must be characterized by a dialectic between these two hermeneutical efforts as the congregation interacts with the situation of its neighbors.

The congregation as a hermeneutical community is related to its past, present, and future as it addresses and is addressed by the Bible. The congregation encounters the Bible

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[18]See above, 219.

as a partner in a dialogue that is intimate and open, listening actively and caring deeply. Through the dialectical encounter with the Bible, the members of the congregation are met by the active Word of God. They experience the words of the text as a challenging, provocative, questioning, probing partner in a constantly moving, ever active relationship. Interpretation moves back and forth across the surface of the text until understanding and meaning emerge. This kind of dialectical encounter occurs within a caring, nurturing, affirming community of faith.

At the same time, the congregation experiences its setting within the larger context of a community outside its walls. The dialectical nature of the congregation's dialogue with the biblical text has necessary implications for the participation of its members in actions to help transform situations of suffering, oppression, injustice, and dehumanization. Many sociological definitions of a congregation describe the interactions that take place <u>within</u> the congregation. They discuss the patterns of interaction between the members of the congregation. They list the values that are shared and transmitted from generation to generation. But it is rare to see descriptions of the congregation in sociological terms that take seriously the participation of the congregation in actions that promote justice and humanization. The question is whether the limitation is in the range of issues that sociologists choose to study, or whether

it is the congregations' lack of attention to issues of justice and humanization. More frequently, and more sadly, the latter is true.

The congregation that establishes a dialectical relationship with the Bible is led to critical reflection on the situation outside its doors, as well as within its boundaries. Both Groome and Gadamer employ the language of praxis to describe the hermeneutical experience of persons. The reflective action and active reflection that exemplify praxis approaches to Christian religious education are incomplete if they do not include a step in which the world neighboring the church facilities is also addressed dialectically.

CHAPTER 9

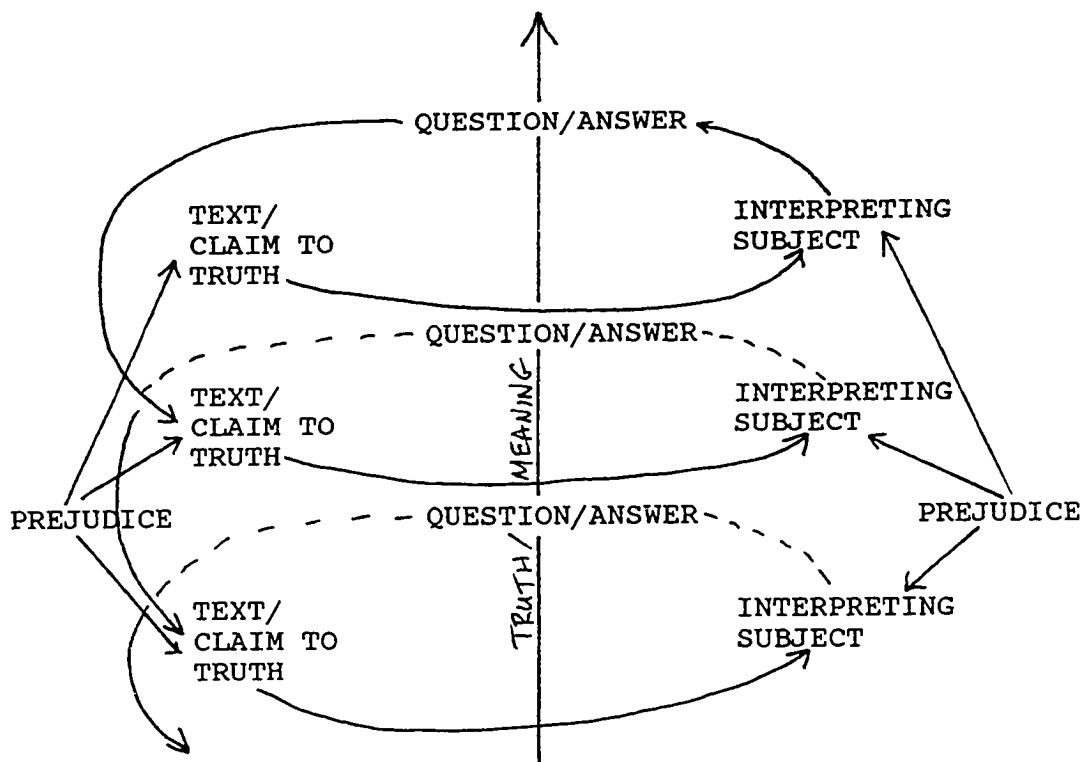Biblical Hermeneutics: Swirling Winds Of Faith

The dialectical understanding of hermeneutics that characterizes Gadamer and Groome has been illustrated by the model of a spiral. Weinsheimer suggests that Gadamer's hermeneutic is better described by a spiral than by the more common hermeneutical circle, because in his understanding the experience of interpretation never ends.[1] Interpretation always involves moving deeper and deeper into the heart of the subject matter. When one interprets a text or an event, she or he is led toward the essence of the point being made by the dialogue partner, but even more importantly, by the subject matter shared by both partners in the event.

Gadamer expresses his appreciation for the Socratic method of the interchange of question and answer because meaning emerges in the process of dialogue about the issue at hand or the text under investigation.[2] Groome also empahsizes the importance of dialogue as the central approach of Christian religious education. The congregation as a hermeneutical community draws upon the contributions of Gadamer and Groome to develop an intersubjective approach to the Bible as well as a <u>praxis</u> understanding of the community. An illustration of an intersubjective hermeneutic might be the following:

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[1]Weinsheimer, 40.

[2]Gadamer, <u>Truth and Method</u>, 325-26.

Gadamer's Intersubjective Spiral

TEXT/
CLAIM TO
TRUTH

QUESTION/ANSWER

INTERPRETING
SUBJECT

QUESTION/ANSWER

TEXT/
CLAIM TO
TRUTH

MEANING

INTERPRETING
SUBJECT

PREJUDICE

QUESTION/ANSWER

PREJUDICE

TRUTH/

TEXT/
CLAIM TO
TRUTH

INTERPRETING
SUBJECT

The spiral illustration demonstrates several elements of Gadamer's understanding of _praxis_. First, the poles of the dialectic are the interpreting subject and the text. Each partner has a claim to truth.

Second, the hermeneutical event is illustrated by the solid arrows. Hermeneutics may begin with either pole of the relationship. However, the action of the encounter takes place by means of question and answer: the text poses questions of the interpreter's world, the interpreter responds with her or his questions about the truth and meaning in what the text says.

Third, each interchange of question and answer means that the succeeding exchange of questions will begin at a different place from the first. This is what makes _praxis_ a spiral instead of a circle. The hermeneutical circle implies that, once the hermeneutical event is completed, the interpreter is back where he or she began. Gadamer claims that every act of interpretation results in something new, something which moves one deeper into the essential claims of the subject matter that engages the partners in dialogue.

Fourth, the downward direction of the spiral indicates that the purpose of a _praxis_ hermeneutic is to continue moving toward the heart of the subject matter. Gadamer's use of the Socratic method illustrates his belief that hermeneutics continue to focus and clarify the essential claims of the subject matter until one reaches the point of understanding.

Fifth, the spiral illustrates the process of hermeneutics. However, Gadamer makes it clear the process does not _produce_ meaning. Meaning _emerges_ out of the process. The vertical arrow coming up through the middle of the spiral represents the emergence of truth and/or meaning out of the hermeneutical event. Truth and meaning are found in the midst of the dialogue between partners. They arise out of the attention to the essential claims of the partners about the subject matter. The upward direction of the arrow represents the emergence of meaning out of the heart of the dialogue itself.

Mary Poplin has also illustrated what she calls holistic/constructivist approaches to teaching and learning by using a spiral.[3] Drawing upon the structuralist work of the later Piaget, Poplin suggests an alternative to the reductionistic approaches to teaching and learning that are typified by behaviorism. She claims that persons learn by constructing new meanings that are based on alterations in their own previous meanings. When persons learn, they do not learn facts in a book as much as they re-construct their views of the world as a result of new information.[4]

One contribution of Poplin's presentation of the spiral of learning is the claim that every new experience involves a new spiral of knowledge, not just new information for the old spiral. Many theories of Christian religious education are reductionistic. They claim that one model of education will work in all congregations and for all groups within the congregation. This is one assumption that seems to inform the development of many curriculum resources. Poplin's suggestion implies that every learning situation is a new spiral. One method will not be applicable to every learning situation because every spiral is unique.

Two Christian religious educators who have employed a

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[3] Poplin, "Holistic/Constructivist Principles," especially 403-04.

[4] Ibid., 403.

spiral model for their work are Marion Pardy and Iris Ford.[5]
Pardy develops her model through a study of Piaget, Gadamer,
Groome, Freire, and Ernesti, among others. She proposes the
spiral as an appropriate way of describing the encounter model
of Christian religious education. Her illustration is simple,
and virtually without any explanatory labels.

Ford, on the other hand, describes the faith spiraling
model with full labeling of each element. One purpose of her
presentation of the spiral is to explain faith development.
Her discussion of the spiral is a way of describing
developmental issues through a more dynamic and interactive
approach than one finds in the early work of James Fowler and
others.[6]

Another source for the spiral metaphor is Mary Elizabeth
Moore's address to the Religious Education Association meeting
in Toronto in November, 1987. The closing plenary address was
entitled "The Quest for a Centre in a Swirling World." Moore
utilized the metaphor of the spiral as a whirlwind that
constantly swirls and changes.

Gadamer and Groome claim that understanding always
changes and grows. Freire focuses on understanding the

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[5]See Pardy, 132. See also Iris M. Ford, Life Spirals:
The Faith Journey (Burlington, Ontario: Welch Publishing Co.,
1988).

[6]Ford, 20-21. Ford has been an associate of Kenneth
Stokes in his Faith Development Through the Adult Life Cycle
project, originally commissioned by the Religious Education
Association.

community's situation of oppression. Gadamer's attention is directed toward understanding the subject matter of a text that addresses the partners in dialogue. Groome examines the dialectic between the Christian Story and Vision and our stories and visions. Each approach claims that the dialectical nature of hermeneutical encounter means that learning always changes.

As one addresses or is addressed by a text, the dialogue that follows leads him or her deeper into the emerging meaning that is a function of the interaction between text and interpreter. Meaning is not inherent in the text. Each question, each dialectical exchange between interpreter and text, especially the biblical text, asks one to re-construct her or his world-view. Every new understanding leads to more questions. Every new action leads to reflection on the theoretical bases upon which the actions were taken. The dialectical interchange leads deeper into the matrix of emerging meaning, both of the subject matter, and of the self who is being formed and reformed and transformed in the interaction.

The spiral illustration of Gadamer's hermeneutic suggests a metaphor for the congregation as a hermeneutical community. The downward motion of the spiral, the constant interaction of the complex elements that form the dialectic and give it its power, and the emergence of meaning from the center of the interaction suggest the metaphor of swirling winds: swirling

winds of faith.

The Swirling of the Winds

Christian religious education that is oriented toward the congregation as a hermeneutical community can be described by the metaphor of swirling winds of faith. The author lives in a section of the United States in which weather patterns change rapidly and dramatically. Persons raised in the Southeast frequently experience heavy rains, gusting winds, violent thunderstorms, and tornadoes. The area of Central Florida, where the author presently lives, has the highest incidence of lightning strikes in the world. Weather is very changeable and potentially threatening in the Southeast, as it is in other parts of the United States, as well.

One hobby the author has developed over a lifetime in the Southeast has been the studying of weather maps. The normal pattern of movement of masses of air across the map of the United States shows a frequency of contact between warm air masses and colder air masses. The normal pattern of interaction between these meteorological forces is that a mass of cool (or cold) air, generally from the west, invades an area where a mass of moist, warm air from the south has been stagnated. The cooler air, being more dense, has the tendency to fall toward the surface of the earth, while the lighter, moist air tends to rise into the atmosphere, where it is cooled, condenses, and comes back to the earth as precipitation. In normal circumstances, the interaction of

these competing air masses will create wind, rain, and occasional lightning. The natural inclination of the warm air to rise and escape into the atmosphere is carried on with a minimum of fanfare.

Occasionally the cold front, instead of dropping under the warm air, will overrun the warm air. In effect, this places a cap or lid upon the warmer air below. The cap prevents the warm air from escaping, so that the interaction of downward moving cool air and upward moving warm air becomes trapped within a limited area. The velocity of the interaction increases as the forces of these two masses of air struggle toward resolution of the conflict between them. A tornado occurs when one mass dominates another and forces the natural interactions between them to turn in upon themselves.

The spiraling shape of the tornado results from the forces of interaction within the tornado as well as the growing density of the storm, which is literally pulled down from the clouds that have produced it. The movement of a tornado is counterclockwise because the interaction between the competing air masses creates an area of low pressure which, in the northern hemisphere, moves counterclockwise. A tornado seeks the earth, as it is constantly led toward the ground.

While the formative forces within the tornado circulate toward the ground, the force of the swirling winds becomes so severe that it creates a partial vacuum in the center, or

vortex, of the storm. Anything that comes in contact with the vortex is pulled up through the center of the tornado.

There are opposing forces at work in the swirling winds of our weather. The downward movement of the dense, cool air and the upward motion of the warm, moist air are similar to a dance between forces that may be beneficial, but are potentially destructive as well. The winds that come into play in the interaction of air masses swirl about in an almost endless variety of ways. However, the most typical motion of these swirling winds is a spiral of cooler air that gradually moves downward. As long as the warmer air has the chance to move up into the atmosphere and be dissipated by cooler temperatures, the interaction between opposing forces of nature will produce beneficial rains and moderating temperatures. It is only when the cooler air traps and frustrates the natural tendency of the warm air to rise that the interaction leads to creating a tornado. In all cases, our patterns of weather are characterized by a spiralling motion of winds that move toward the ground, while a second motion of warmer air moves up through the approaching cooler air.

Christian Religious Education As Swirling Winds

The natural interplay of the winds as one weather front approaches another is analogous to the process of interaction in the congregation as a hermeneutical community. Gadamer suggests persons engage in a dialogue, as with a fellow subject, when they interpret the Bible. The discussion of

Groome and Freire has suggested that the intersubjective _praxis_ of the congregation within the setting of its wider neighborhood is similarly dialogical. The metaphor of swirling winds serves as a powerful image for understanding the nature of the congregation as a hermeneutical community.

Swirling Winds Are Not Willed Into Existence

No one has discovered the exact conditions in which tornadoes emerge. Meteorologists know the general conditions and the dynamics that _might_ produce a tornado, but the best they can say to the public is that conditions are right for tornadoes to be formed. Tornadoes are not willed into existence, they happen. They emerge out of a complex interaction between very different air masses, moving in opposite directions, and influenced by temperature, humidity, wind velocity, etc. Tornadoes are not absolutely predictable. The same may be said for a variety of other weather conditions.[7] Study of the weather involves the person in a complex interaction of swirling winds and competing forces. Weather happens; no one controls the weather, persons only learn to live within its ambiguities and make the best of its gifts.

Likewise, Christian religious education as hermeneutical

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[7]Some have suggested that, in Florida, the prediction of a 30% chance of rain means it will only rain 30% of the day! The tenuous nature of predicting the weather is well attested by those who have been surprised by an unexpected snowfall or have had outdoors activities spoiled by a sudden thunderstorm.

<u>praxis</u> <u>happens</u>.[8] It emerges out of the complexity of the relationships that exist within each congregation. One of the reasons the weather is different in one part of a town than in another, even though virtually identical conditions prevail, is that a single weather factor is present in one setting and not in the other. To an outside observer, the difference between the two settings is negligible; however, it is the presence of that one factor that seems to make all the difference.

Christian religious education as swirling winds of faith happens within the context of each congregation, or it does <u>not</u> happen. One cannot predict when the conditions will work and when they will not. Therefore, the attempt to import educational methods from denominational publishing houses, educational think-tanks, and a variety of experts, is risky, at best. Christian religious education emerges out of the shared experience of the congregation as it struggles together with the biblical witness to God's ongoing presence and to the reality of life within the community that surrounds it. While there are signs that might point to the probability that such education might happen, just as there are signs that conditions are right for tornadoes to be formed, no one can will Christian religious education into existence. It emerges out of the <u>praxis</u> of the congregation. One problem with the

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[8]The author is using the word <u>happens</u> in the way Gadamer uses it. See Weinsheimer's use of the term "hap" to describe the surplus of meaning in understanding, 8.

production model of Christian religious education curriculum is its easy assumption that, by applying the correct curriculum, proper teaching methods, and developing the spiritual life of the students, the Christian religious educator can produce a Christian at the end of the process. Like swirling winds, Christian religious education cannot be predicted with certainty. Christian religious education happens.

Swirling Winds Emerge Out of Complex Interactions

Various theorists in Christian religious education have tended to look at a limited set of factors that influence education. As important as the community of faith approach has been in the past three decades, there is more to the work of Christian religious education than the efforts to socialize or enculturate persons into the community.[9] The various theories influenced by liberation theology, including Groome's shared Christian praxis, tend to limit their descriptions of Christian religious education to political and economic action.

Mary Poplin discusses the reductionistic tendencies in educational methods, especially focusing on the behavioristic approaches that seem to have dominated the field in recent decades. She proposes three alternative approaches that answer

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[9]Foster, "The Faith Community," 68, as well as Jack Seymour's introduction to Contemporary Approaches to Christian Education, 22, suggest some of the limitations of this approach.

this reductionism: structuralism/constructivism, critical pedagogies, and feminist approaches to education.[10] She claims that no <u>one</u> approach to education is both necessary and sufficient.

Christian religious education that is characterized by a focus on the congregation as a hermeneutical community is structured in a complex interaction among the various forces at play, both within the congregation and outside its doors. The attempt to describe these interacting, complex forces in terms of one approach fails to recognize the wide-ranging factors affecting the actions of the congregation.

<u>Tornadoes Occur Because of Domination</u>

Tornadoes are formed when one air mass overruns and dominates another. The destructive power of the swirling winds and vacuum created from this domination describe the kind of problems raised by Freire's discussion of oppressive and dehumanizing approaches to education and sociopolitical coercion. Educators, whether Christian religious educators or public school educators, need to be aware of the potentially destructive effects of using educational methods that reinforce and promulgate the continuation of these oppressive relationships.

<u>A Tornado in the making: Youth Ministry</u>. A case in point would be the way in which youth ministry has been understood. Many persons have suggested that youth live within a culture

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[10]Poplin, unpublished manuscript.

that is very different from the adult culture.[11] Adolescents have their own sets of values, their own rituals, their own mechanisms of communication, their own language, their own world-view, all of which differ dramatically from the adult culture. However, much of youth ministry has focused on attempts to socialize youth into the mainstream adult culture.

The tornado metaphor comes into play because the youth culture is not taken seriously on its own terms. Instead, much of the church has insisted that youth in the congregation become like the adults in the congregation, reflecting the adult values and adapting to the adult world-view.

One result of this approach to youth ministry is that the adult culture tends to place a cap on the ability of the youth culture to operate in its own way. Various studies have suggested that the questioning of the adult world-views is both predictible and necessary for the adolescents' agenda of developing their own world-views and their own faith.[12] The coercive imposition of the adult culture creates forces of conflict between this culture and the youth culture that can

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[11]Roland Martinson makes this suggestion in Effective Youth Ministry: A Congregational Approach (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988). See his discussion in Chapter 6, 57-64.

[12]Richard Osmer presented an object-relations approach to youth ministry emphasizing this point. Richard Osmer, "An Object-Relations Approach to Youth Ministry," paper presented to the seminar group, "Youth Ministry in the Theological Seminaries," sponsored by Lilly Foundation, December 5, 1987.

be compared to those that produce tornadoes.[13]

A Tornado averted: Hermeneutical praxis. Christian religious education as hermeneutical praxis needs to be aware of the potentially destructive forces that arise when one culture or sub-culture attempts to dictate the faith to others. The metaphor of swirling winds is descriptive of the positive interactions between persons and the Bible, and between persons and their own involvement in the world. Swirling winds are dialectical;so are tornadoes. Swirling winds exist because of interactions between several environmental factors. When the factors no longer function, the winds cease to exist.

Christian religious education is also characterized by elaborate and complex interactions, many of which can combine to produce positive, humanizing, faith-strengthening results. Many others are potentially harmful, oppressive, and dehumanizing. The educator needs to be aware of the interactions within each congregation to identify and nurture those that might lead to greater justice and increased faith. She or he must also limit those that tend to delimit and counteract creativity, imagination, and transformation.

Winds Swirl in Several Directions at Once

The basic direction of movement for wind currents is a

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[13]See "Advancing the Quality of Ordained Leadership," Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Division of Higher Education (St. Louis: Division of Higher Education, 1990), 44-47.

counterclockwise rotation of the winds that produce the storm and a downward movement of the cooler air. Praxis approaches to education and philosophy also demonstrate a rotation between the poles of the dialectic and a downward movement as the to-and-fro, question-and-answer interplay of the subjects moves deeper into the heart of the subject matter that creates the hermeneutical event. Each question raised by the biblical text forces the interpreter to reformulate her or his view of the world and of the subject at hand. This necessity of reformulating one's world-view can be an upsetting experience. For many persons, the disequilibrium caused by the questioning at the heart of the hermeneutical event is deeply troubling. For many others, questioning and disequilibrium are the occasion for growth.

Each transformed world-view leads to an alternative theory out of which the individual lives in the world. The actions available to the subject are never the same as they were before the theoretical construction of the world was changed. New action is always required when theory is altered. New action leads to new theory, which in turn leads to new action. The dialectical interplay of praxis is an ongoing, life-long experience of responding to the past, living in the present, and living toward the future.

Gadamer also suggests another connection with the swirling winds metaphor. Meaning is not a function of the downward motion of the interaction. The interplay between the

congregation and the texts of its faith does not <u>produce</u> meaning. Neither does the interaction between the congregation and the larger community setting. Meaning emerges in the center of the interaction itself, not out of the separate efforts of the partners in the dialogue.

In addition to the downward spiral of the winds, there is an upward movement within the interacting air masses. In most cases, the rising of the warm air happens without incident. Indeed, without this second direction of air flow the necessary processes that produce rainfall would not be possible. The competing air masses interact in a variety of ways, ranging from the gentle breezes of Spring to the destructive tornadoes of the same season. But, in all cases, both directions of motion can be found. Likewise, meaning emerges from the interaction between the partners in the dialogue and is pulled upward, in the opposite direction from the flow of the spiral itself. The spiral, which would be the occasions of interaction among the elements of the congregation as a hermeneutical community, provide the opportunities within which meaning might emerge. But meaning itself <u>happens</u>. Meaning is not produced by activities we program in Christian religious education. Meaning emerges from the interaction of persons who trust, listen, respect, and live in solidarity with each other, with the Bible, and with their neighbors. The following figure illustrates a model of Christian religious education as the tornado of faith:

Christian Religious Education as Winds of Faith
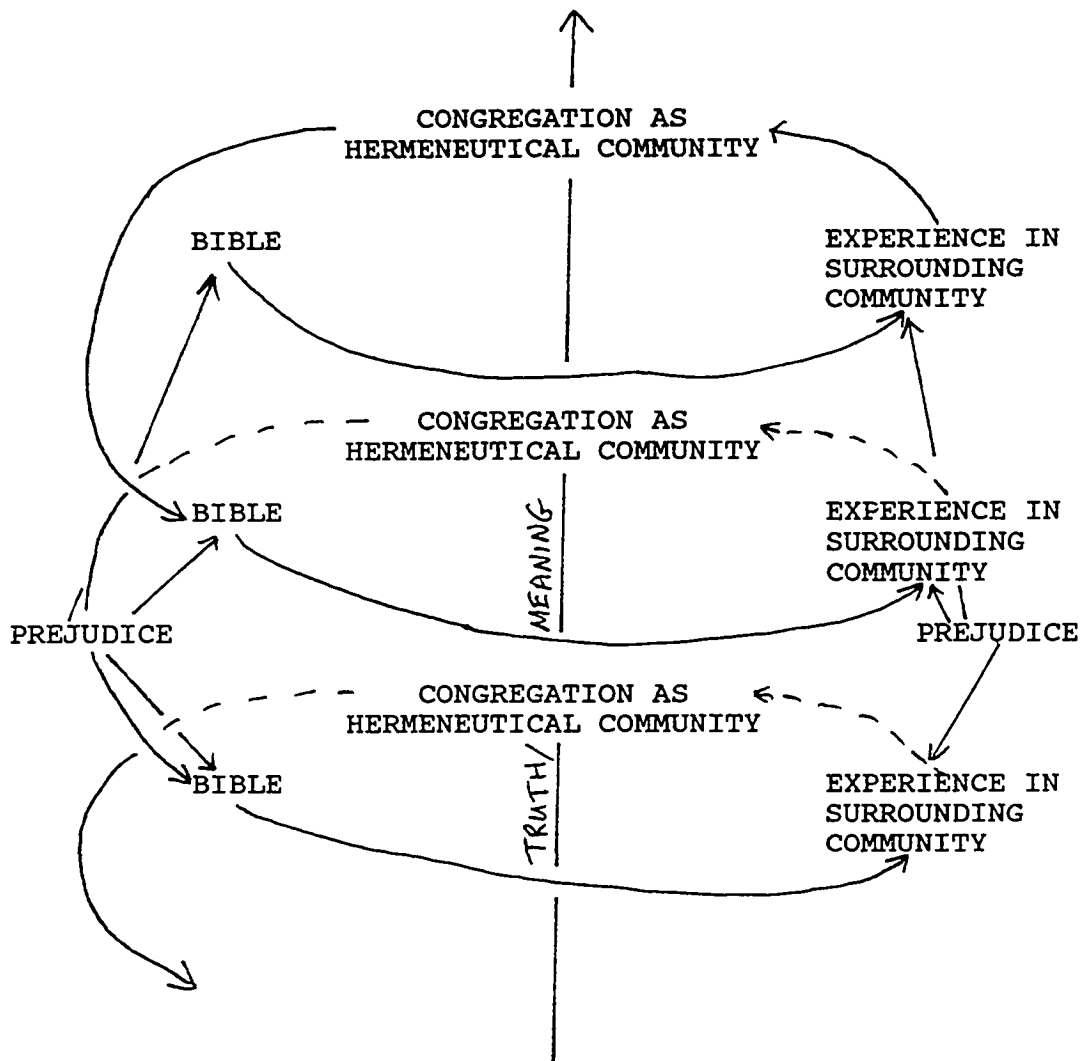
The illustration needs some interpretation. First, as suggested in this chapter, the congregation as a hermeneutical

community engages in two parallel hermeneutical moments.[14] The congregation engages in dialogue with the Bible as the people are encouraged to listen to questions raised by the Bible about their actions in the world. At the same time, the experience of dialogue with the Bible leads them into dialogue with those in need outside their walls. The hermeneutical experience of the congregation may be seen as two separate spirals that merge as the congregation responds to God's leading.

Second, the direction of the initial movement in the spiral leads the congregation ever deeper into the emerging meaning and power of God's self-revelation in the community. Each experience of responding to the biblical text and its implications for the way the congregation responds to its setting is something new. A hermeneutical community is never static, because praxis leads it forward toward the Vision of the Reign of God.

Third, meaning and truth emerge for the congregation out of the interaction of the forces that compose its hermeneutical experience. Christian religious education as swirling winds of faith is always contextual; meaning is always meaning for here and now. Meaning and truth are come upon as persons follow the praxis of their shared experience

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[14]Gadamer speaks of understanding, interpretation, and application as three moments in the one act of hermeneutics in Truth and Method, 274-8. The author is using the two hermeneutical moments of the congregation in the same way.

as persons of faith.

The Congregation As a Hermeneutical Community:

Swirling Winds of Faith

The congregation as a hermeneutical community is a dynamic interaction of several separate hermeneutical activities. The dialectical nature of the interaction is one in which the congregation's attention to the Bible always leads the congregation out into the community where the implications for new action take realistic shape. The actions of the congregation in working for justice, in joining with the experience of the community to alleviate situations of domination and lowered self-esteem, always lead the congregation back to dialogue with the Bible and the formation of new theoretical understandings of the Christian faith.

The model is dialectical. It moves between _theoria_ and _praxis_; the twin moments of interpretation and understanding constitute the interaction within each pole of the larger dialectic. Every event of Christian religious education constitutes a separate example of the swirling winds. Every event has the potential to reveal something of the nature of God and the challenge of ministry. Every event has an equal possibility of producing disastrous effects as well. The task of the congregation as a hermeneutical community is to establish dialogue with the texts of the Christian faith and with the socioeconomic and political nature of its neighborhood in such a way that its members find their world-

views challenged.

Tornadoes occur in nature when one system attempts to dominate another. The same is true in the church. Christian religious education can become an oppressive factor in the lives of the congregation's members. In such a case, the swirling winds metaphor may be replaced by that of a tornado. Christian religious educators need to be aware of the factors within the congregation that might dominate and find ways to control that tendency.

At the same time, Christian religious education as swirling winds of faith should celebrate the interaction, the spontaneity, the power, and the emergence of meaning that is possible when persons live in dialogue with each other, with the texts of their shared faith, and with their neighborhood.

Conclusion

The congregation as a hermeneutical community is like swirling winds of faith. It is intersubjective. It deals with persons within the community as fellow subjects who explore the endless play of the hermeneutical event of being addressed by and addressing the Bible. In the process of this interaction, persons are transformed. They are led toward actions that transform their experience. The swirling winds of faith also relate persons in the congregation with those outside the walls of the church building as fellow subjects. These neighbors of the congregation are not objects that receive the sympathy and guilt of the members of the

congregation. The intersubjective nature of the hermeneutical commuity as swirling winds of faith means that a partnership exists among the members of the congregation and their experience with the Bible and with the community in which it is situated.

The model is also dynamic and contextual. It does not impose a standardized approach to Christian religious education. Every approaching cold front presents an almost endless variety of possible types of interaction with the existing warm front. Each congregation must construct its own approach to Christian religious education. Unless the educational approach arises from the situation of the people, unless it responds to the generative words of the congregation itself, it runs the risk of oppressing persons within the congregation and objectifying the Christian faith.

The model is also complex. One cannot simply describe the process of Christian religious education as socialization, liberation, or kerygmatic.[15] Meaning emerges as persons struggle together and are transformed by what emerges. Gadamer and Groome both recognize the complexity of this interaction.

Transformative education always involves persons, not merely processes. When the congregation realizes its task as hermeneutical engagement with the Bible and with the larger community, it must always recognize that it does not educate

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[15]See Mary Boys, <u>Biblical Interpretation</u>, which focuses on the kerygmatic, or salvation history era in religious education, especially within the Roman Catholic tradition.

facts, figures, and data; it educates persons. When the congregation models a community that sees itself as dynamic swirling winds of faith, the congregation will finally humanize and nurture its members and its community toward the shared Vision of the Reign of God.

The metaphor of swirling winds of faith serves as warning and as promise. The fact that tornadoes are one possible outcome of the interaction of competing air masses warns of the potentially destructive effects of educational methods that seek to dominate instead of include. It warns of systems that oppress and the dangers of imposing formal requirements and pre-packaged programs upon persons. The destructive nature of tornadoes serves to make persons take the task of Christian religious education seriously.

The metaphor of swirling winds of faith also serves as promise. Meaning may emerge out of the complexity and situatedness of each experience in the community of faith. When a community shares together its historic faith, when its members celebrate a dialogical relationship with the Bible as a fellow subject, when the community of the congregation recognizes the needs of its own people and those in its immediate vicinity equally, powerful things can happen. Christian religious education that is intersubjective, hermeneutical, praxis-directed, and responsive to God's presence in the past, present, and future may have the energy of swirling winds without the destructiveness of a tornado.

The metaphor of the hermeneutical community as swirling winds of faith offers an option to the objective understanding of the Bible. The metaphor also offers hope to those who have been ignored for much too long: the poor and homeless outside the walls of the church building.

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